

# **Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 7**

**Shouji Gatou**

VISIT...

LANZAROTE  
*Caliente*.COM

#07

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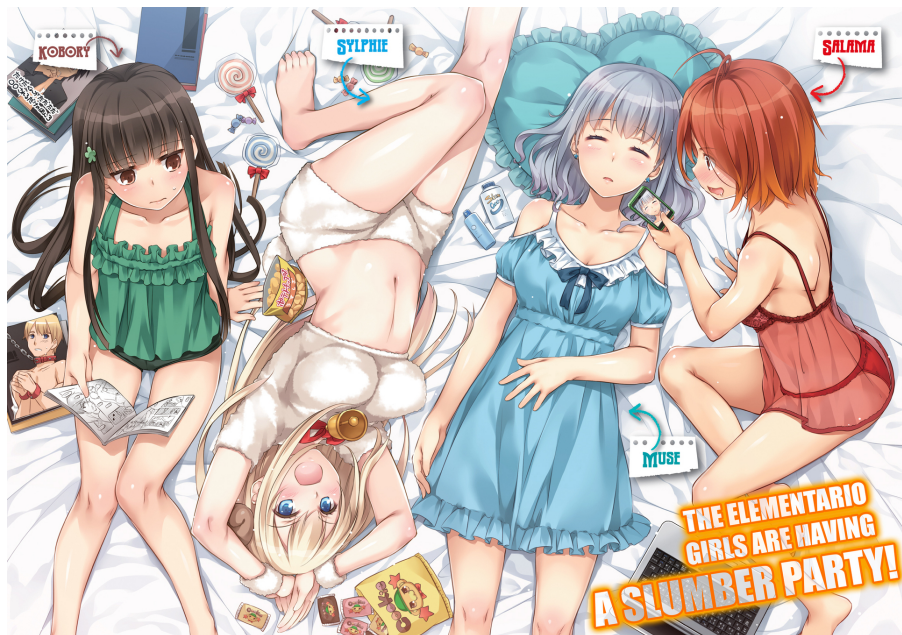
Amagi  
Brilliant  
Park



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#07









Muse was standing in front of a conspicuous convenience store on a big thoroughfare near the station, wearing her street clothes...

"Don't tell anyone... about what?"

"Salama... seriously, don't tell anyone, okay?"

Why do you like Panda...



An anime-style illustration of two young women in a greenroom. The woman on the left has long dark hair with pink flower clips, a green cardigan over a white dress with a yellow flower, and a large yellow bow. She is blushing and sweating. The woman on the right has long blonde hair with a blue bow, wearing a white halter top and blue shorts, also blushing and shouting. The background is white with pink and yellow polka dots.

In the  
greenroom of  
Elementario...

“I  
knew  
it!  
I always  
thought  
it was  
strange!  
I’ve been  
showing  
off my  
panties!”

“I’m just  
fiiine!”

# Amagi Funky Paaaaaark

EVERYONE'S FEELING GREAT WITH  
PALPON NEXT SUPER JET! ONE BLOOSH  
AND EVERYONE'S SUPER EXCITED!



I'M JUST THE USUAL  
SYLPHIE! TOO BAD!



HEY, IT'S NO PROBLEM!



WE'RE ALL GETTING ALONG!



WOW! GET  
UP-PAH!

WAIT, YOU PEOPLE!

COUGH!  
URGH... NGH...



PLEASE! YOU CALL THAT  
DANCING? LET ME SHOW  
YOU HOW IT'S DONE!



WOW! I FEEL  
GREAT, FUMO!  
DADADA!

IS THAT... PALPON  
FLOWER...?!

POWWW!



WHAT'S ALL THIS NOISE, RON?!

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# Prologue

In the greenroom of Elementario (formerly Aquario)—

“Guys, guys! Awful news!” cried the Spirit of Water, Muse. She ran up to her three companions—Salama, Kobory, and Sylphie—who were taking a break between performances.

“What’s wrong? Last I saw you, you were rummaging around in the back warehouse...” said the Spirit of Fire, Salama. She had been lazily messing around with her smartphone, but now she looked at Muse, brow furrowing.

“Um, um...” Muse was acting strangely, trembling, as if she’d just just learned something life-changing. Her eyes were full of tears. It was like she’d just reached the final stages of a complex plamodel, only to realize that she’d read the instructions wrong. Her entire manner seemed to scream, *I’ve done something that can’t be taken back*. “O-Okay,” she began. “I... I was sorting through our old materials, and...”

“Wow, during lunch break?” Salama asked. “You sure are into this whole ‘job’ thing...”

“I was bored!” Muse said defensively. “The storage area has been a mess for so long, and I thought I might stumble onto something interesting...”

“Fine, whatever. So what happened?”

“So then... then... way in the back of this set of drawers, where you’d never think to look... I found these!” Muse held out a wad of cloth, a few washcloths’ worth in size. The material was thin and wrinkly, a basic beige that more or less matched the girls’ skin tone.

“.....? What’s that?” Salama asked curiously. “Tights?”

“Yes!” Muse wailed. “Tights!” They were full body stockings, the kind that provided coverage all the way from the neck to the toes. They seemed to be in women’s sizes, too.

“So, what about them?” asked the Spirit of Earth, Kobory.

“These things came out of *our* costume area.”

“Huh. So... wait. Wait a minute. You’re saying...” The insightful Kobory seemed to have made the connection already.

“Yes. That’s right.” Muse looked at the ground. Her shoulders, laid bare by her revealing stage costume, were trembling. “...Do you remember what happened when we first took over this job?” she asked.

“Sure I do... It was right after the last girls in the roles quit, right?”

Boy, that was rough..." Salama said, with a nostalgic air. "We didn't even know what kind of dances they did."

"Right," Muse agreed. "And they didn't tell us about their costumes, either."

"Yeah. But... we had some blurry pictures of them, and they'd left the costumes in the lockers... and since we'd just met each other, we collectively assumed it was okay to just wear them as-is, and... um... wait, are you saying..." Salama hugged her own outfit—the bust portion, specifically. It was a very revealing costume, the back of which was open to reveal just a hint of bare bottom.

"Yes! Exactly!" Muse cried out, her voice breaking. "Because nobody told us... we've been under the wrong impression this whole time! These tights!" Muse brandished the bundle of wrinkly beige tights. "I just realized that the original dancers in this theater—our predecessors—wore these body stockings under our costumes!"



“?!”

“!!”

“.....?”

The reactions of the other three were widely varied. Salama and Kobory went pale, while the Spirit of Wind Sylphie just tilted her head in confusion, indifferent to the atmosphere as usual.

“W... Wait a minute,” Salama whispered, voice trembling. “Are you... are you telling me... we’ve been parading around this whole time, half-naked, thinking, ‘I don’t really get it, but it is what it is’...”

“We’re exhibitionists!!” Kobory screamed, her voice breaking with tears. “Exhibitionists! I knew it! I always thought it was strange! Thighs, belly buttons, and cleavage out there for everyone to see! I knew it wasn’t right for an amusement park! Children and mothers come to see us! They can’t want this kind of sex shoved in their faces! They must hate us!”

“Hey, calm down, Kobory...” tried Muse.

“How can I calm down?! I’ve been showing off my panties! I-I mean, it probably looks pretty cute from behind, right?! But from the front... it’s just all out there! I’m an exhibitionist!” Kobory’s costume was a pristine design of green and white. Inch for inch, it wasn’t as revealing as others, but the front was outrageous: the dress split in two right around the solar plexus to reveal her belly button, as well as her white underwear beneath. It also left her legs completely exposed. Naturally, men’s eyes tended to be drawn to her lower half; the fact that it was so demure from other angles just amplified the sexiness. Whoever designed this costume was a bit of a pervert. “I knew it was strange! I knew it was strange! Wh-Wh-What am I going to do?!” She started nervously shifting her weight back and forth.

Muse and Salama rushed to calm her down. “Chill out, Kobory. Your embarrassment just makes it sexier!”

“I’m not trying to! I swear, I’m not trying to!” If she’d been wearing the body stocking, it would look more like a figure skater’s costume; she wouldn’t have had to worry about how bold it looked from the front. “What about you, Salama-san?” she challenged. “How can you be okay with it?!”

“Huh?”

“I mean... it shows your whole back! You can almost see your bum! And it’s strapless! Your breasts could pop out at any minute!” Kobory pointed out. “Doesn’t it scare you? How brave are you?!”

“H-Huh? I t-take precautions, that’s all! I think of it as a leotard! I don’t... I don’t really...” Despite her words, Salama hid her chest and backside with her hands, fidgeting.

“Look at you!” Kobory said accusingly. “You’re shaken, I can tell!”

“Nggh...” Salama gritted her teeth, tears forming in her eyes.



"Wh-What about you, Sylphie?" Kobory asked. "Don't you mind?"

"I'm just fiine!" Sylphie beamed, sticking out her ample chest; indeed, she didn't seem to mind at all. She wore shorts on her lower half, and the top was a flimsy cloth number designed to accentuate her bust. Her costume was certainly the most revealing of the four, but she genuinely seemed comfortable with it.

"Yeah... I figured," Muse sighed.

"You're so strong, Sylphie," said Salama, sounding envious.

"I bet she'd go on a nude survival reality show..." Kobory finished. After three weeks on a desert island, Sylphie'd not only come back alive, but she would probably even gain weight.

"Yeah! I'll do my best!" Sylphie cheered.

*You don't really have to, though...* The other three thought simultaneously, but decided not to say anything. It would just invite trouble.

"...So? What do we do, Leader?"

"Huh?" Muse's eyes widened at Salama's question.

"The tights. We're going to wear them from now on, right?"

"Well... yeah! We have to, right?" Muse insisted. "We want to, right? I mean, these outfits are way too revealing, right?!"

"Yes. We're exhibitionists," Kobory said again. "Let's put them on right away. ASAP. You agree, right, Sylphie?"

"Don't care either way!" Sylphie sang breezily.

"...I see," Muse replied. "So you're fine with wearing them?"

"Roger!"

"Okay, so no objections. It's decided, then, right? Well..." Muse then fell silent.

"What's wrong?" Salama asked.

"Well... Now that I think about it, it isn't just our decision," Muse said slowly. "Do you remember that stack of documents Kanie-san sent us for the new fiscal year? Contract renewals and such?"

"Oh, hey, that's right," Salama remembered. "I didn't really read them, though."

"It had a lot of clarification about rights and such. Picture and video rights, character rights... I didn't see anything out of the ordinary, and it came with a slight pay increase, so I thought it was a good deal, but..." Kobory added.

"I signed it with all my might, wielding my Yotsubishi Haiyuni!" Sylphie declared.

In other words, all four had signed the contract.

"Right. But, um... there was... there was this." Muse used her smartphone to call up a PDF of the contract she'd put on the cloud. "Um, clause 16, item two. 'Any change in stage costumes or character appearance must be discussed with party the first (cast) and party the

second (park). If an agreement cannot be reached, presentation will remain as heretofore established,” she recited.

“That’s pretty technical,” Salama observed. “What does it mean?”

“It means we need park management’s consent to change our costumes,” Kobory said.

“Kanie-kun’s, then?”

“At the moment, yes.”

“Then let’s go ask him.”



“There’s no way I’m approving that,” Kanie Seiya said, turning them down flat. They were in his office in the general affairs building. “We just spent a chunk of money renovating Elementario. We advertised it, too. You’ve captured the hearts of the fathers, and we have regulars who come here, over and over, to see you guys. Now you want to add body stockings? Are you nuts? You want to dance around in the kind of far-infrared tights worn by menopausal women in winter? Who’s going to like that?”

“Um, us?” Muse suggested.

“And exactly no one else!” Seiya’s words were scathing. “Let me— Let me explain something, in case you have the wrong idea. You seem to think the reason you have the fourth most popular attraction in the park is because of your dancing, or the quality of your show!”

“But... but we’re working so hard!”

“Everyone’s working hard! We all are!” Seiya snapped. “Right. Okay, I’ll admit it: Your dancing isn’t bad. Muse has a charm that draws people in; people like the quiet affection Salama shows for her teammates; they appreciate Kobory’s hard work; and Sylphie’s wildness and vivacity are well received. ...But! But! Your dancing alone still isn’t enough. It only matters to about one person in ten, and that’s a problem, because to bring in audiences, we need mass appeal. Which means that until you can reach a new level in performance quality, you’re being carried by your sex appeal! That’s the main reason anyone cares about you!”

“B-But... the mothers and children...”

“I’m aware of that issue,” he said. “Costumes that men appreciate drive away the women—that was going to be the trade-off from the start. But! From what I’ve seen in practice over the past few months, it hasn’t actually been that major a problem. Some women do dislike you, but most just laugh it off, most likely due to your awkwardness and charm. Now, how will most guests take it if you started wearing body stockings now?!”

“.....!”

“That’s right! They’ll think you’re stifling them! When you stop

offering something you previously gave out for free, you lose good will! It's like a restaurant that's been offering free gyoza with fried rice then suddenly stops. It's no good for anyone! No matter how good the rice is... you still disappoint the customers!"

"Ugh... ngh..."

"Get it? We need to keep offering the gyoza set," Seiya insisted. "That's why I can't approve the idea. Give it up and go onstage; your customers are waiting. Dismissed," he said with finality and went back to his documents.



They left the general affairs building and stalked to a corner of the underground passage.

"That *jerk*! How could he do this to us?!" Salama huffed.

"But we couldn't argue with him, could we?" Kobory said, slumping over.

"And he's still only in high school. I shudder to think about what he might become," Muse said gloomily, with a slight shudder.

"Gyoza pose!" Sylphie declared and struck a baffling yoga pose in the corner.

"But if Kanie-san insists, we'll just have to keep wearing the old costumes, I guess..." Muse sighed.

"Our only other choice would be to quit," Salama said flatly.

"I really... don't want to quit," Kobory muttered.

They didn't want to quit. That was one thing they all agreed on. They'd worked hard to get as far as they had. They had been a terrible team at first, with sloppy dancing and disparate personalities, four people who would never associate under normal circumstances, forced to stand on the stage together in an empty theater.

In promotional material for amusement parks and tourist sites, you usually see pictures of girls having fun together. But if you look closely at the images, there's always an air of desperation about them. It's because in reality, these girls were strangers, models dispatched by their agencies, who had probably just met on the day of the shoot—and yet, they were supposed to smile into the camera like best friends who had known each other for years. The Elementario girls had once had that same sense of tension to them.

But it was different now. They'd shared joy and hardship. Their dancing had become more in sync, and they could perform their wire stunts without crashing into each other. They were united in purpose. It was hard to imagine going somewhere else, now, and dancing with new girls they didn't know.

"I feel the same way. I don't want to quit..." Muse said.

"Ditto!" Sylphie chimed in.

Salama smiled wryly and grabbed onto her costume's frilly, revealing miniskirt. "Okay, so it's decided. We keep at it?"

"Yes," Muse agreed. "Kanie-san was right, after all..."

"We've been wearing them for so long; it's a little late to start acting embarrassed..." Kobory put in.

"Mm. But... a gyoza set? Surely he could have found a better analogy..." Muse continued.

"Yeah." Huffed Kobory.

"It sounded tasty, though!" Sylphie said happily.

"Focused on food, as always..."

The four of them came together in a long laugh. Then they sighed, before straightening up proudly. *Let's keep it up! I think we're probably okay with this!* was the thought they seemed to share. They all spontaneously took hands, and then—

"Ron... What's all the hubbub here, ron?" a member of the cast, Macaron, asked as he approached them. He was the Fairy of Music and the park's second most popular mascot. He was probably taking a break after finishing up a performance at his own attraction.

"Ah, Macaron-senpai. Actually..." Muse explained the situation to Macaron. They'd just been through an emotional wringer, so they probably wanted to tell somebody.

"Hmm... that's a very moving story, ron." Macaron nodded deeply. "We're all rooting for you guys, ron. And we all welcome your decision to stay in those costumes, ron."

"Thank... you?" Muse hazarded.

"Yes, yes. It's a good thing, ron. A very good thing, ron."

"Wait a minute!" Just as Macaron was about to leave, Salama stopped him.

"Ron? What is it, ron?"

"There's something I've been wondering... When we first came to this park, you guys were already veterans, right? You'd been here a long time, right?"

"Yeah. So what, ron?"

"So you knew what our predecessors wore, right?" Salama continued.

Macaron froze up. "....."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Ron," he said innocently. "About what?"

"Well, you knew, right?" she insisted. "Why didn't you tell us 'you're wearing the costumes wrong'?" Muse and Kobory both caught on at the same time. (Sylphie just stared into space.)

"Well..." Macaron hesitated, his back still turned.

"Well?"

"Ron. I... I'm sorry. I actually knew, ron! But, but... you put the

costumes on like it was normal! Like it had to be that way, ron!”

“...?” The girls waited for Macaron to explain himself.

“Here’s the way we saw it, ron: ‘Wow, these girls are willing to put it all out there. They’re real exhibitionists. I wish them the best, ron. But they sure are exhibitionists!’” The four girls began to bear down on him, forcing him into a desperate defense. “But... it worked out for the best, ron! It’s the reason you got popular, right? It’s a good thing, ron! Though it probably sucks for you guys...”

“What about the others?” Salama demanded. “Did they know?”

“Yeah. We all agreed, ‘the new girls are real exhibitionists,’ ron.”

Muse and Salama snapped and grabbed for Macaron’s throat. It took about three minutes for Kobory and Sylphie to pull them off of him. Between struggles for breath, Macaron made things more complicated by confessing that it was a specific person who had hid the tights in a place that would be difficult to find, and that this person was the Fairy of Flowers, Tiramii.

The head of the secretarial department, Sento Isuzu, had come running. She punished Macaron and the others with her musket and warned him that Tiramii should come out of hiding. Because other members of the veteran cast who were complicit (such as Wanipii) defended Tiramii, Fairy of Sweets Moffle, who was returning home from a business trip, went on a rampage (nobody knew why), which Isuzu put down. But a stray shot killed Kanie Seiya (he was revived the next morning), and after all the chaos, the question of the girls’ costumes was left unsettled.

Despite all this behind-the-scenes strife, the guests weren’t going anywhere. Muse and the others got up on stage in their usual outfits. They ran their usual program. But maybe a hint of their shame still leaked through, because that day, their performance got better reviews than usual.



# That Time the Spirit of Fire Got Back From Work and Found Her Apartment in Flames

So, I got off the Nanbu Line at my usual station, and I knew right away that something was weird. I could hear fire trucks in the distance, and the avenue in front of the shopping district was packed, and there were middle-aged ladies on condo balconies turning their smartphone cameras in the direction of my apartment.

Everyone knows that feeling, right? That “something is off in my neighborhood” feeling. I saw a guy who works at the local kara-age shop pass by. I guess he was doing the whole volunteer firefighter thing, because he was dressed in one of those big, heavy suits on a bicycle trolley full of hoses. I figured there must be a fire, so I quit my tweet-walking and ran a search on my neighborhood.

Ah, there it was. Fire, fire, fire... looked like there was a fire in my neighborhood. I guess it's a little heartless, but I actually found it pretty exciting! I mean, come on, a fire! I had to get pictures! I scrapped my tweet-rant about that annoying drunk on the train, posted “my neighborhood is on fire,” and took off running!

So FYI, my apartment was in an old building about a ten minute walk from the station, a one-room deal on the second floor. The rent was pretty cheap and it was close to the station, plus it had fiber-optic Internet even in 2013 and a delivery box for stuff I bought online. I liked it.

As it turned out, that was the building that was on fire. Turbo on fire! It must've started in the ramen shop on the first floor; the third floor and the building's south half looked fine, and it was nice to see that everyone had made it out safe.

But my apartment—apartment 202—was hella on fire. Even the laundry I'd left to dry on the balcony was burning. The men's underwear I'd strung on the line to prevent theft was a flaming ball of fire, drifting through the air.

Ahh, those undies... I'd been a little embarrassed about that whole thing; I'd gone out of my way to buy them at a convenience store one station down. (I could've just as easily bought them on Nyamazon too, but like hell I wanted *that* in my cookies.)

“Clear the way, clear the way!” A fireman ran up and started to spray.

“S-Stop! Stop!” Crying in distress, I charged towards the burning building, but a firefighter stopped me.

“Miss! Do you live in the second floor apartment?!” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Is there anyone inside?”

“No... I live alone!”

“Any pets?”

“N-No!”

“Then you need to stay here!” he said. “I understand how you feel, but it’s dangerous in there! Don’t do anything rash!”

“But... but...” *You idiot! My PC and router and hard drive are in there! Plus my clothes, my shoes, my bags, and some accessories I just bought! Plus the cooking stuff I was getting the hang of! The dishes I kinda liked... and... and...*

“Just stay back!” he warned me, then turned the water on full blast. The spray from the fire truck was really something. He looked like a pretty strong guy, but he still had to struggle to fight the recoil.

The last of my windows broke under the strain. Droplets that hit the walls turned to mist, which showered down on us, even at our distance. I’m telling you, the spray was incredible.

It was sort of educational—the site of the blaze was more cold than hot, more water than fire. We were all soaking wet. I was learning a lot.

I wanted to cry. In fact, I did cry... I might be stuck working a gig at a crummy local park, but I’m still a Spirit of Fire; a real Spirit of Fire, from a real magical realm. I’d never felt so helpless.

I had the power to set things on fire, but I couldn’t put them out. I couldn’t save my precious hard drive or my cooking stuff. I mean, right? If I were the kind of awesome spirit who could control fire at will, I wouldn’t be stuck doing what I do.

“Ah... ahh...” I trailed off. There was only one thing left to do, then. Surrounded by the shouting firefighters, I stood right where I was, whipped out my smartphone, and started composing.

Despite the situation, my fingers moved swiftly and precisely. 《I got home and found my apartment on fire lololololol》 Yeah, the lol-string is a little passe these days, but, you know... it’s just what comes to mind at times like these. What can you do but laugh?

My retweets immediately broke 5,000. I picked up a huge number of followers, too.

Some big aggregator site ran the story, “AmaBri Spirit of Fire’s House is On Fire AF lololol.” I mean, most of the comments were things like, “deserved it lol” (from people who hated me); since nobody had died, there was nothing holding them back. It was super depressing, but I guess it served me right for saying all the things I’d

said online. And anyway, some people said nice things, so I guess that helped.

Since there was nothing else to be done, I decided to start reporting on what the firefighters were doing. *Go, firefighters! Win, firefighters! You're the ones who protect our city!*

My live reporting got me even more attention. People really liked it, and I was getting the hang of it pretty fast. Since I was streaming a lot of video, I started running out of battery soon enough. I had to run to a nearby convenience store and buy a spare.

Once the fire was out, I came back to my senses. Someone from the insurance company toured my apartment and explained a few things, but it was hard for me to focus.

The fire plan I'd chosen with my rental contract was the cheapest one, which meant it would only replace a portion of the cost of my lost household goods. I only had a few expenses besides that, but apparently they'd only put up 30% of what I'd need for temporary lodging. (I'd receive a little more later, but that was my understanding at the time.)

Now, the guy whose ramen shop started the fire? He had a super great insurance policy. Three months later, he opened a fancy new shop in the neighborhood. It was pretty good; he got tons of customers, and seemed to have a bright future ahead of him.

I'd eaten at his place now and then in the past, but no way was I going there again. Flat-out boycott—I even gave him a one star review on every food site I could find. I hope it catches on fire again.

Meanwhile, I'd lost everything. Lesson learned: Even if there's only a one-in-ten-thousand chance that fire will strike you, even if it costs 1,000 yen a month... good insurance is important. Too bad I learned it too late!

Master Keaton once said that insurance is basically gambling. I'd lost my bet, so now I just had to swallow it. Just... swallow it. If I was being recouped for 100% of my living costs, I'd be able to stay in a super luxury hotel in Shinjuku, but that wasn't going to happen. I didn't have any savings, either. And so...

"Help me!" I begged. "Let me stay with you!"

The first person I called was my coworker, Muse, my hard-working comrade in the world of dance and the leader of Elementario. She was really nice and cute and serious, and she had these pinchable cheeks... um, what I mean to say is, she was the closest thing to a best friend I had.

I figured Muse would have heard about the situation, and that she'd say 'yes' immediately. I thought she'd say, "That's awful, Salama! Come over right away! You know Seiseki Station? I'll come meet you!" I thought we'd spend the night pillow to pillow, and she'd

say “Salama, are you asleep yet?” and we’d stare at the ceiling and talk about our plans for the future and our love lives.

For just a second, I forgot about how much everything sucked! I even started smiling! I’d never actually stayed at her place before, so I started thinking, maybe the fire was an okay price to pay as an excuse for the opportunity?

So... when I realized that Muse hadn’t responded yet, it was a minor (no, a major) shock.

“Ah, um... Salama?” Muse hesitated. “L-Look, my apartment is... it’s a little messy right now...”

“Who cares?” I told her. “Mine’s charcoal!” *If you need time to clean it, I can wait a few hours, okay? I could even help if you want it! And even if your room is messy, the irony of that is kind of fun! It’ll be a bonding moment! It’ll be our shared secret! Yeah!* Restraining my nostrils from flaring, I told her again and again not to worry about it, but Muse held firm.

“R-Right,” she said. “I... I really appreciate it, but... um, I also have a... landlord situation. I’m not really... comfortable having people stay over...”

“Huh?” I asked.

“N-Not like that! I don’t mean that you’re a bother, okay?” Muse tried to explain. “It’s just... bad timing, I guess? And I don’t think I can do it... without prior warning...”

“I... I see.” I was immediately deflated. I guess I was the one being weird, though. The fire must have caused me to lose my cool. Playing the victim to force my way into her apartment... now that I thought about it, who wouldn’t get annoyed by that? After all, no matter what I might hope for, Muse was just a colleague. I didn’t have the right to use this to push for more.

“I’m really sorry, Salama!” she apologized.

“Ah... Y-Yeah, I get it. I get it. I’m the one who should apologize. Haha...” I said, trying desperately to keep up appearances.

“S-Salama... I really mean it! I wish I could say, ‘come over right away!’ But... I can’t, okay? I just... have circumstances right now...”

I couldn’t imagine what those circumstances could be. But Muse said it was impossible, so that probably meant it was.

“Yeah. I get it, okay?” I said in my coldest voice. Typical me.

“Salama...”

“I’ll find somewhere else. Don’t worry,” I said. “There’s plenty of people I can ask. It’s not like I don’t have any friends...”

“...Really?” Muse asked.

“Yeah,” I told her. “See you.”

“Sa—”

I hung up, and let out a sigh.

I stood in front of the convenience store (the one where I had bought the spare battery) two blocks from the site of the fire, totally at a loss.

It was getting close to midnight. Soon the trains would stop running, too.

Go figure, all my big talk to Muse was a lie. I didn't really have many friends. I mean, you know me... selfish, thickheaded, sarcastic? People hate me, and I know it.

I just find the whole "exchanging shallow pleasantries" thing a real drag, so I refuse to go through the motions. About the only people fully willing to overlook my tactlessness are my Elementario partners: Muse, Kobory, and Sylphie. Moffle and my other senpais have said some pretty crummy stuff about me; same pretty much goes for the rest of the cast.

I thought about asking Kobory or Sylphie for crash space, but the fact that they were colleagues kind of made it harder to ask. If they both turned me down, too, I'd be crushed. And if they did let me stay, people around the park would say, "I knew it, she's got no friends!" And that's just... no. Not happening. I was just thinking about going to a family restaurant and leeching free refills all night, when I got a call from an unexpected source; it was Sento Isuzu-chan, head of the secretarial department.

"It sounds like you've had quite an ordeal, Salama," Isuzu-chan said. "Do you have a place to stay? If not, you could share my apartment in the women's dorm."

"Um, I—"

"Unfortunately, most other park facilities will be locked up by now. You could stay in the security center, but I doubt you want to sleep next to Okuro. So by all means, stay with me."

I thought it was weird how certain she sounded, but after consideration, I realized she was right. Security Chief Okuro is a good guy, but he's also super burly, like an ex-wrestler, and even wears a mask at work. In other words, a total weirdo. I mean, he's probably not the type to take advantage of a sleeping woman; he seems like more the gentleman type... but somehow, that seemed like it would make it all even more overbearing and enervating and exhausting... In other words, Isuzu was right; I did *not* want to sleep next to that guy!

"Ah... sure," I agreed, "I'll take you up on that."

"You may take a taxi if you wish," Isuzu told me. "I'll compensate you."

"Thanks."

"Don't forget to get a receipt. I'll be waiting." She hung up the phone.

Isuzu-chan met me in front of the AmaBri girls' dorm. "I'm glad

you made it, Salama. Come inside.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am,” I said. Isuzu-chan always spoke casually around me, even though she’s younger than I am. If I wasn’t careful, I usually ended up speaking respectfully to her (which Muse and the others do naturally, so it’s not weird!). I think it’s more of a personality thing than a work positions thing?

Isuzu has strength of character, influence, and... I guess you’d call it combat prowess. Was this how people felt when they got into college two years behind schedule and ended up using formal language in their clubs with students who were a year younger but had been there longer? Yeah, probably. (Not that I’ve been through that myself; I just read about it on a blog once).

Isuzu-chan was dressed in her around-the-house clothes. It was August, so without AC, it was pretty hot. She was dressed in shorts and a tank top. *So sexy! And those tits! I can’t stand it! Plus I kind of want to touch them! Dammit!*

“...What?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing...” I told her weakly.

“...Your twitter commentary was quite impressive,” Isuzu commented. “It’s brought the park a great deal of visibility. I was also impressed by your professionalism; even in a situation like that, you kept your head for business.” She said she was impressed, but her monotone made it kind of hard to believe.

Of course, I hadn’t really been trying to drum up business for the park. That kind of thing is just in my nature, because I’m a sad, attention-starved, desperate person. *Please don’t make me sound better than I am!* I thought. Normally, I’d throw a surly denial her way, but I was exhausted tonight, so I just said, “Ah, yeah...” which was the most noncommittal response I could manage.

My attention right now was on something else: a bathtub enshrined in the dining room. Yeah, I said a bathtub. *In the dining room.*

The AmaBri girls’ dorms weren’t exactly extravagant; the building was over 20 years old, and they were all one-bedroom/dining room/kitchen deals. In other words, they were your typical cheapo apartments, and they didn’t have the full bathroom that came standard in newer ones. If you wanted to take a bath, you probably had to use the shared facilities. In Isuzu’s apartment, though, a space that’d usually be used for a cupboard and a table had been cleared to make way for a tub. There was a hose linking it to the kitchen’s water heater, which was filling it with hot water even at this moment.

“You must be tired,” she said. “You can go in first.”

“Huh?” I said, surprised.

“The bath. You can go in now.”



“Um, but...” I did want to take a bath! But... what on earth was going on? “Uh, are you sure?”

“In what regard?” Isuzu asked.

“Well... the floor,” I said. “It’s wood, right? And we’re on the second floor...” One liter of water weighed one kilogram; if it was a 200 liter bathtub, the whole thing probably weighed about 250 in all, right?!

“It’s reinforced,” Isuzu explained. “I use it all the time and I’ve never had any problems.”

“What about the humidity?!”

“It’s drying,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

I looked and saw five air circulators on the window sills, running at full blast. Nothing to worry about, then, right?!

“Anyway, get in.” Her tone, once again, left no room for argument. With no other choice, I deferred to her generosity(?), and got into the bath. I really would have liked a proper soak to let all my tensions out, but that wasn’t exactly possible in this situation. So I kept my bath short, and when I got out, I found a fluffy Tiramii bath towel and an XL-sized Tiramii T-shirt laid out for me—park merch. They were nice to dry off with and wear, but having Tiramii-senpai’s face printed on them made things a little bit awkward.



“Um... Is this okay?” I asked.

“Is what okay?” Isuzu answered from the living room.

“The Tiramii-senpai merch,” I replied. “I mean, I feel a little like he’s ogling me...”

“.....” Isuzu-chan remained silent for a significant length of time. “I didn’t even consider that. Would you burn the towel and T-shirt when you’re done with them, then?”

“Ah, right...” I agreed.

“Don’t even leave ashes behind,” she said solemnly. “Please.”

“Right...”

“Now, let’s get some rest,” she told me. “I have an early morning tomorrow, as do you.” There was a sleeping bag laid out on the living room-slash-bedroom floor. Assuming that was for me, I was about to get in, but Isuzu-chan did it before I could. “I can’t allow my guest to sleep on the floor,” she insisted.

“But—”

“You take the bed. Now, good night.” She promptly closed her eyes.

Hesitantly, but with few other choices, I lay down in Isuzu-chan’s bed. An unfamiliar pillow. Unfamiliar sheets... It was hard to relax, and I couldn’t sleep right away, so I started messing with my smartphone while I settled in.

“Salama,” Isuzu-chan said suddenly. “Don’t play around on your smartphone before bed.”

“Huh?” I protested. “But I can’t sleep...”

“It’s bad for your eyes,” she insisted, “and the backlight will end up making you more restless.”

“Fine...” I grumbled.

“Even if you can’t sleep, lying down with your eyes closed will provide some recuperation,” Isuzu advised me. “Try to rest with that in mind.”

But I couldn’t rest. I wanted to chat a little longer. Sleeping with Isuzu-chan felt like sleeping in a military barracks.

“Just put away the smartphone,” she told me sternly. “Understood?”

“A-All right.”

“This conversation is over. Now, rest.” Apparently it wasn’t up for debate.

With no other choice, I turned off my smartphone and closed my eyes in the dark. I endured that for an hour, but I still couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t even lie still. I had to know how many views my fire commentary videos had gotten!

Isuzu-chan already seemed to be asleep. She was breathing slowly and deeply (and a little cutely). I started thinking, *If she’s asleep*

anyway, maybe I can afford to turn on my smartphone? I was just moving my finger toward the button when...

"Turn that smartphone off!" Isuzu-chan commanded.

".....?!" I was surprised.

"Lord Moffle. Turn that smartphone... off..." Then she fell silent again.

She was talking in her sleep! And about... what, exactly? With a sigh of relief, I activated my smartphone. I was delighted to see that my views had surpassed 10k.

"Stop it!" Isuzu demanded.

"?! " I jerked involuntarily.

"Seiya-kun... stop it." she said, with a hint of a moan. More sleep-talking, huh?

And... Seiya-kun? Did she mean Kanie-kun? Were they close enough to refer to each other that way?! And what did she mean by "stop it?" Huh? Wait... Was this some kind of sex dream?!

"Seiya-kun... Stop... that button will... fire... the nuclear weapons..." What the heck kind of dream was she having?!

"The lives of three million people..." An action movie?!

"D-Don't... make me shoot you..." Kanie-kun was about to press a button to fire nuclear missiles, and Isuzu-chan was trying to stop him? It felt like things were reaching a climax!

"So turn off that smartphone, Lord Moffle!" Now back to that?! It made no sense!

But that was the last of the sleep-talking. Apparently a restless sleeper, Isuzu-chan ended up throwing off half of her sleeping bag. My questions about the nuclear button and Moffle-senpai's smartphone made it even harder for me to sleep. By the time I finally drifted off, it was already getting light outside; I probably got less than two hours in total.

An alarm set for 6:30 AM sounded; Isuzu-chan finished her morning bath and shook me awake. I pleaded with her for a few more minutes, but go figure, she didn't indulge me. I didn't have to waste time on a commute, which was nice, but my performance that day was pretty rough anyway. Not that my performances were ever exactly wholehearted, so not a whole lot lost in that respect... but I did miss a lot of steps in my dancing, and I got sent into a spin after colliding with Kobory during the wirework section.

Pretty much nobody brought up the fire. A few said things like, "Oh, I saw your commentary, ron," and "It must have been hard, fumo," and "Do you have a place to stay? You can stay at my place, mii," but while most sounded pretty concerned, none of them probed too deeply. After all, we were all busy with the summer vacation rush; nobody had time to hang around and chat. It was all we could do just

to scarf down our rice balls and shoot the breeze a bit between shifts.

Muse was acting a little awkward around me, probably because of last night. At least she seemed worried.

But that evening...

I was trying to figure out what I should do, since I couldn't get comfortable in Isuzu-chan's apartment. I was just thinking about taking a chance and camping out, when Kobory came up to me.

"Salama-san," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Would you like to stay with me tonight?"

I was totally shocked by the offer. I always figured Kobory-chan was the member of Elementario (formerly Aquario) that I got along with the worst. Kobory was an introvert with long black hair, and she was a real otaku-type (though she herself denied it). For fashion, she mainly wore Anna Sui and stuff for her off-work clothes (pretty expensive stuff... where did she get her money?). She was earnest and polite with everyone, even more so than Muse. She was always really concerned with other people's feelings.

I always figured that Kobory hated how sloppy I am with my work, and how careless I am with my words (I'm aware of it! I am!), and we've had plenty of differences of opinion in the past. Still, I took her up on her offer.

Sure, Kobory and I didn't really mesh, but it's not as if I hated her. And I couldn't deny her god-level purity (ugh!) and cuteness levels. I'd also recently figured out that that stuff wasn't calculated on her part—Kobory was as straightforward as you could get. So I mean, who wouldn't want to delve into her private life?! Who wouldn't want to see her secret messy, pissy side?!

After work was over, then, we headed to Kobory's apartment in the neighboring Chofu City.

"Salama-san." We'd just stopped by a convenience store and bought a little late dinner when Kobory addressed me. "I've actually been hoping we might get a chance to talk in more depth..."

"Ah... right," I agreed uneasily.

"I know the circumstances are rotten for you, so I felt bad about it, but tonight felt like a nice opportunity to me."

"Ahh."

"So... I'm really sorry. I didn't plan this, but... I kind of got into a little trouble," Kobory told me. "There's some work I have to do that I can't get out of, so I'm not sure we'll have much time to talk..."

"Oh... I see. Well, I don't have to stay if I'm in the way."

"No! You *have* to stay!" Kobory rejected my politeness with clenched fists. She sure could get passionate about stuff like this... "I can't throw you out right after I invited you! Besides, look at those

clouds! It's going to rain soon. It's going to pour!"

"Yeah... there's thunder in the south, I think..." The weather forecast had mentioned thunderstorms, and they could start any minute now. I really needed a roof over my head tonight.

"Anyway, I'm sorry," Kobory told me, "but I'll have to have friends staying over tonight... I hope it's okay."

"R-Right. ...Well, I don't think that'd bother me. Wait, you said *friends*?"

"Yes. They kind of help me with work. They're like... assistants? Oh, there they are. Over there." She pointed me to a group of three girls gathered in front of the building. They were pretty cute, but their outfits were super plain: track suits, sweats, that kind of stuff... total lounging-around-the-house gear.

"Ah, there she is! Welcome back!" The three waved, then came to meet Kobory.

"Kobo-chan, I'm so sorry! I think I sent the message to the wrong address! But if we don't get it to press first thing in the morning, we're finished! I really am sorry! Really!" A bespectacled girl in a track suit, who looked a bit like the leader, apologized profusely to Kobory.

"Um... Well, I'm not really happy, but we can't let the others in the collab doujin project down," Kobory said. ".....I'll do my best!"

"Yes, that's the way! I bought you waffles from ORANGE to say I'm sorry! Let's do our best! ...Hey, is this your co-worker, Salamasan?" All three of them turned to me, staring at me curiously.

"Ah... hey," I said.

"Waaah! It's her! It's really her!" Suddenly, their eyes were sparkling.

"I saw your commentary last night!"

"I've been following you forever!"

"You're so harsh, but I love it! I'm a total fan!" they gushed, one after another. I felt a little bit intimidated by all the sudden attention. I was glad it was all positive, at least, but what was with these people?

The three of them were gabbing as they headed for the elevator. I stayed behind and whispered to Kobory, "Um, what kind of friends are these?"

"...my art group friends." Kobory said hesitantly. "Please don't tell anyone, but I draw fan comics for a hobby."

"I... I see."

"The doujinshi fair is in two days. We'd finished the work on the booklet we were putting out... but I just found out we still have to do the collab doujin."

"What's a collab doujin?" I wanted to know.

"You bring together creators from various groups to create a single book," Kobory explained. "But there's been a lot of phone tag and

missed contacts, and as a result, it fell off the radar... It's been a series of, 'What? Nobody told me.' You see it a lot with Tricen-san and Macaron-san and them... You know. It makes me so angry that I want to use a Daitengu Masaie to cut someone in half! But I don't have a choice. I can't make trouble for the other groups. Fortunately, the others have done the storyboards, so as lead artist, if I work all night... I think we can finish it."

"Ahh," I said. Her explanation didn't really clarify things at all. "What's a Daitengu Masaie?"

"It's the name of a katana," Kobory said. "Of course, I don't really have one... Don't worry about it."

"I see."

"Incidentally, my quota is four pages. Even though I'm not a pro. It's pretty harsh..." she sighed. "I don't think I'll get any sleep tonight."

"I... see."

"By the way, Salama-san, do you know how to use CS?" Kobory asked.

"Use what?"

"Oh, okay," she sighed. "I didn't think you did..."

"Seriously, what is it?"

"Comic Studio, it's software you use for drawing manga. I was going to ask you to help me if you could, but... sorry. You should probably just go to sleep."

"R-Right..." I agreed.

Of course, I couldn't sleep after that. Kobory and her art group friends were crazy busy drawing their manga. They'd let me use the bedroom next door, but I couldn't help overhearing their stressed out exchanges in the living room.

"Um, do you think 60L10% is okay for this tone?"

"...Didn't I tell you to use gradation for the nipples? That's a screentone!"

"Ah, right... sorry."

There was no way I was sleeping like this. They insisted that it was just a hobby, but that tone in their voices... The tension... This was work! I don't know why, but I felt like I was skipping out on work to sleep, and I felt really guilty about it!

I couldn't take it. I snapped to my feet and left the bedroom. It was 2:30 in the morning. I'd planned to just tell them I needed a glass of water and head right back in; I said hi to Kobory, but she was so laser-focused on her tablet that she didn't even notice. It was honestly incredible; I'd never seen her that focused during dance practice. Maybe this kind of work was more her speed?

Incidentally, Kobory's assistant friends didn't seem to be doing

anything. They'd initially been helping out on Kobory's secondary PC and the laptops they'd brought from home, but when I came out, they were just messing around. One of them was even doing some sewing. Why was she sewing at this time of night?

"It's for cosplay!" the sewing girl declared when she noticed me squinting at her. "It's a booth costume. You know the comic we were drawing? There's this one character in it who's featured! See? Cute, huh?"

She showed me the picture of the character. I thought it was a girl at first, but it was actually a boy in girls' clothing.

Wuh. Weird. ...Or so I'd wished was my reaction, but he actually was pretty cute. It was a really nice picture, too. The lines were delicate, and it had a strange allure. Whoever drew this was amazing. And this was a boy? Yeah, I kinda liked it. I wondered what the boy's name was.

"Salama-san, do you want to wear it?!" the girl asked excitedly.

*Huh?*

"Yeah! I bet it'd look great on you! You've got such a masculine energy!"

*Um. Excuse me?*

"You don't have to wear it on the day of the show!" she said. "Just for now! For now!"

*Just for now? Well, um, but...* While groping for an answer, I cast a glance at Kobory. She was so focused on her drawing that she didn't even seem to hear our conversation. She wasn't looking. She wasn't listening.

I was feeling a little loopy, too, probably due to lack of sleep. If I turned the girl down now, it might crash the mood even worse, which would make it even harder for me to sleep, and... "Ah, um. Well..."

Ten minutes later...

I got changed in the bedroom so I wouldn't get in Kobory's way, and when her assistant friends saw me, they started squealing with joy.

"Yeeee!"

"It's great! It's so great! I knew it'd be great!"

"You're a princess! There's a princess among us!" the girls shouted in excitement.

I was wearing a, um... magical girl (boy) costume? Kind of thing... It was actually a lot less revealing than the stage costume I wore all the time, with long sleeves and knee socks. It looked a little bit like Isuzu-chan's winter uniform, actually. But even so... Why did I feel so embarrassed?

Pastel pink. Frills. It was so girly. And they even made me hold this magic stick thing... I would have loved to wear something like



this as a kid, but I was a grown-up now. It just felt like a weird fetish! I felt like a 40-something with high school-aged kids, dressing in a sailor-style school uniform! When I expressed my reservations, they all denied it vehemently.

“No, no, no! You’re wrong!”

“It looks great on you!”

“And the shame just makes it better! I love it!”

“R-Really?” I asked. Despite my doubts, I gave a twirl. The pleated miniskirt flared out and the three screamed even louder.

“Oh, gosh! Oh, gosh! Salama-san, you’re too good!”

“Someone shy and mean playing a pure character is incredibly powerful!”

Ignoring my discomfort, they took out smartphones and started taking pictures. *Wait a minute*, I thought. *I didn’t agree to a photoshoot! Hey!*

“Salama-san! Do one more twirl!”

“Ah, okay...” I found myself doing it. I showed off all the frills. The girls were delighted.

“This is great! It’s great!”

“It’s criminal! Just crazy!”

“Salama-san! Keep it up! Keep it up! Arch your back and hold out the stick!”

“Huh?” I asked. “Huh?”

“Like this! Like this!” The girl in the track suit showed me, and I did it. I held up the magical stick (it was also really well made) and posed with my fingertip on my chin.

“Yes, perfect! Now the catchphrase! ‘My stem cells are in top gear!’”

*Um, what?* I wondered suspiciously. *What kind of story is this?*

“Salama-san, please!” the assistant begged. “Please please please please!”

“But...” I tried to protest.

“If you can’t do that, just say ‘stem cells, yeah!’”

*That makes less sense! What kind of story is this character in?!*

“Anyway, at least say... at least say ‘stem cells!’ That’s the one thing we desperately need!”

*You don’t need it! I thought. What is this stem cell obsession?!*

“Yes. Good luck, Salama-san!”

“Make it sound cute! Come on! ‘Stem cells!’”

“S-Stem cells...” I stuttered weakly.

“Do it cuter!” the assistant demanded. “And don’t forget the pose!”

“S-Stem cells...” I said.

“Yes, yes! That’s the way! With the cute pose! One more time! One, two...”

“Stem cells!” I held up the magic stick, twirled my miniskirt, and shouted the line with a beaming smile. The three took picture after picture, shrieking in delight.



Just then, I noticed Kobory standing outside the room. I froze. Her eyes looked empty and bloodshot as she glared at me. I was frozen in position, wearing a frilly magical girl(?) costume, holding a stick, and striking a pose.

"Um..." Kobory said. "Excuse me, but it's three in the morning."

"S-Sorry," I mumbled. Can you imagine the despair I felt? Wearing that outfit, striking a pose, and being told, "it's three in the morning"? Good thing I didn't have a gun or a knife on me. I would've killed myself on the spot!

"You're going to bother the neighbors," Kobory said.

"R..... right," I agreed.

"Anyway, guys. I have the sketches done."

*Wait a minute, why did they get off with an 'anyway, guys'?! Does she think I'm the ringleader?! That's not fair!*

"Okaaaay!" Kobory's art friends slumped back to work.

Once they were all out of the room, Kobory walked up to me and whispered: "I'm sorry. I can imagine how it happened. They all forced you, right?"

"Ah... yeah," I admitted.

"I'm really sorry... But anyway, get some rest," Kobory said, then went back to the room next door. As she did, she took the opportunity to get a picture of me with her smartphone.

"Ah... hey?!" I protested.

"Good night."

"How can I sleep?!" I wailed. I felt like she'd gotten blackmail material on me. It was awkward, embarrassing, pathetic... By the time I dozed off, it was already morning.

I must have looked like a zombie from lack of sleep, because everyone I met on the way to work looked at me with concern. It wasn't just me; Kobory seemed to be on her last legs, too. She had worked all night, and apparently only got 30 minutes of sleep in the end. So, a deeply concerned Muse ended up canceling our morning performance (the fact that it was raining helped), and Kobory and I took a nap.

"I don't know what kind of wild party you got up to last night, but..." Kanie Seiya-kun, our acting manager, was saying; he'd heard that we'd taken the day off and had stopped by to look in on us. "You need to take better care of yourselves. We start B-team auditions this week, so I need you to stay sharp until then."

"Yeah. Sorry..." I told Kanie-kun, my head woozy from sleep dep.

In case you're wondering, the B-team was a back-up cast for Elementario. Up until now, the four of us had been running all the performances ourselves. But we needed rest days, and sick days, and it was impossible to keep up half a dozen performances a day seven days

a week while also planning and rehearsing new content. In the past, even during our busy season, we'd been able to arrange a day off on Monday or Tuesday, but we knew we couldn't keep that up forever—we *did* have the fourth most popular attraction in the park, and all—which was why Kanie-kun was putting out want ads for substitutes. We weren't sure how it would work out, but I guessed the idea was that we'd cycle between teams to reduce the burden on us. Which sounded nice on the face of it, but knowing Kanie-kun, he was probably angling to use the chance to give us a pay cut.

And, not to brag or anything, but our dancing and wire stunts aren't actually all that easy. We've gotta fly around in midair, spinning all around and weaving in and out of spotlights, and any accidents we get into can result in major pain. Our popularity wasn't just because of our sexy costumes (...I assured myself).

And sure, it's a stage show, so the audience is far enough away that you can make girls look enough like us with makeup to pass... still, I found myself thinking, could some run-of-the-mill dance school dropouts really do what we did? The B-team auditions would be in two days, and obviously, we'd be taking part in the judging.

"Anyway, get some sleep," Kanie-kun said. "Sento told me about the fire, by the way. Are you still looking for crash space?"

"Yeah, I..."

"I can make room for you somewhere in the general affairs building. I'll be pulling an all-nighter tonight anyway, so if you want a spot on the meeting room sofa..."

"No, thank you!" I said quickly. One night with Isuzu-chan had left me exhausted. Imagine how much harder it would be to sleep around Kanie-kun! Not that I think Kanie-kun would take advantage of me or anything, but he seemed like a hard guy to relax around, in a different way than with Okuro-kun in security.

I mean, he's my boss, and he's super hot. Not that I think it'd go anywhere... But I mean, even if we were in different rooms in a big building, I'd spend the night on the sofa tossing and turning, just *knowing* he was there! Even if nothing happened, I wouldn't sleep a wink! And what if we ran into each other on the way to the bathroom during the night?

You get what I'm saying, right?!

Okay, so maybe it's hard to explain... the point is, I wouldn't be able to relax knowing he was nearby! (I bet that's one of the real reasons he doesn't have a girlfriend.)

But while I was trying to figure out how to answer...

"She's staying at my place toniiiiiiiiight!" ...my coworker Sylphie barged into the conversation.

"Ohh. Sylphie, huh?" He commented. "Is that already worked

out?"

"Yep!" Sylphie responded, grinning.

*No, it's not worked out, I thought. This is the first I've heard about it.*

"Salama. You don't wanna?"

"Er. Well... I wouldn't say that..."

"Then it's on!" Sylphie exulted. "You and me, tonight! I'm nervous, but relaxed!"

*Which is it?* I wondered.

"Okay. Go for it, then," Kanie-kun told us. "Try to get some rest."

"Leave it to me!" Sylphie gave a thumbs up.

Sylphie was the Spirit of Wind. She was the most mysterious out of all my colleagues, the type of person it was impossible to have a real conversation with. Honestly, most of her behavior was a mystery to me. If you said "Good morning" she might say "Lion Pharmaceuticals!" If you said "Lion Pharmaceuticals?" she would respond "Get some rest!" In the greenroom before performances, she would light sparklers she'd brought in and spin around, shouting "flaming top!" It was seriously off-putting at first. I'm sorry to say that the thought that she was mentally challenged entered my mind once or twice.

The truth, though, was that she was totally smart. She could take part in our daily messages and chats—I didn't really understand the replies, but they were in proper Japanese—and she knew some pretty difficult vocabulary.

Sylphie was also physically brilliant; she was the best dancer out of all of us, and she could do anything you asked of her. She was always cheerful and bouncy. She had a great body, too; I mean, supermodel-class great. Her hair was a shining platinum blonde, and her breasts were on par with Isuzu-chan's or Eiko-chan's. She had pretty decent style, and was always put together in some cute outfit or other.

During break times, I sometimes caught her playing with video editing software in her underwear, and she'd be using the English-only version. Then sometimes, when I glanced at her email, she would be replying in some language I didn't recognize, but looked Russian.

But for all the things I didn't get about her, one thing I knew for sure was that Sylphie loved her co-workers. Anytime Kobory, or Muse, or I were cold to her, she'd shrink up and get super depressed. Then, when we'd try to comfort her, she'd cheer right up again. She'd grin and, apropos of nothing, offer us some kind of sweet (these days, it was fresh yatsushashi from Kyoto).

In the end, I just figured she was the savant type, and a nice one at that. At the very least, none of her behavior seemed calculated; she wasn't trying to put up a "mysterious" act to attract attention. She

couldn't be.

Um, so, I guess all in all, Sylphie was just a garden variety weirdo. (That was exhausting in its own way.)

That night was another intense experience. Sylphie lived in a cheap old apartment building in Amagi City proper. It was probably over 30 years old, the kind of building with creaky steel-frame stairs, a laundry machine at the end of the communal hall, and each apartment as a one-bedroom deal.

Things got weird when I noticed that the names on all six of the post boxes read 'Sylphie.' When Sylphie checked each of them, I asked her incredulously, "Y-You rent them all?!"

"Yep!" she told me cheerfully.

"All six apartments?!"

"Yep! So convenient."

*What the heck?* I wondered. Even if they were cheap, given recent market prices, they'd probably run 40,000 yen per room. And if she rented six of them... wouldn't that be 240,000 yen?!

"You can't pay that kind of rent!" I said.

Sylphie just smiled. "I got circumstances. It's just 30,000 pesos for the rent on them all!"

"Pesos?" I asked. *How much is that, then?!*

"Watch your step inside!"

"Huh?"

Sylphie offered the warning as we arrived in front of the cheap door to the apartment at the far end of the second floor. Quietly and carefully, she opened it. Inside were rows of dominoes. Yes, dominoes. Thousands of them. There was hardly any space to walk. There were stoppers placed every few hundred blocks, but they didn't seem very reliable.

The kitchen and living room were likewise full of dominoes; the apartments appeared to have been modified to link the neighboring and lower rooms, and the dominoes continued all the way through them, as well.

"Dominoes?" I asked. "Why dominoes?"

"It's a challenge," Sylphie told me.

"But *why?*"

"Heh heh heh. My life is all about challenges. You just don't get it, Salama-kun!" She held up her index finger and clicked her tongue triumphantly.

"Um, so... it's a challenge, huh?" I hazarded.

"Exactly!"

"How many have you set up?"

"Thirty thousand!"

She must have spent every night for the past month lining up

domino after domino. I did a quick search and learned that the current Guinness record for domino-toppling was 320,000; Sylphie was nowhere close to that, but it was still a pretty amazing feat.

“Yeah, well,” I told her. “Do your best?”

“I will!” She flashed me a v-sign.

We decided to go to bed right away. We’d gone to Sylphie’s favorite okonomiyaki place for dinner and stopped by a nearby communal bath, so there was really nothing to do but sleep. (It turned out the real reason we did all that was that the kitchen and the unit bathroom were full of dominoes.)

“By the way,” I asked, “where do we sleep?” There wasn’t any room to lie down. Even the bed, stripped of its covers and mattress, was covered in thousands of dominoes.

“There,” Sylphie told me. Over the bed hung a hammock, strung between the walls. The idea was to use the minimal available foot spaces to get into the hammock, and sleep suspended in the air.

“Sorry, I think I’ll sleep outside,” I insisted.

Sylphie’s eyes immediately filled with tears. “You don’t like hammocks?”

“It’s not that I don’t like them,” I told her. “I’ve just never slept in one before.”

“Hammocks are fun!” she insisted.

“Oh? Um... I guess they could be fun?” I considered for a minute. “But I probably couldn’t sleep soundly in one. I’m just really tired, you know?”





"You can knock them down..." Sylphie sighed.

"Th-The dominoes?"

"Yeah," she told me. "You can knock them down. I won't get mad!"

I was glad to hear that, but I didn't want to knock them down! If I fell out of the hammock, it would be a tragedy! There were stoppers, so it wouldn't take down all the dominoes in the apartment, but it would still be eliminating a couple days' worth of Sylphie's hard work!

Sylphie stared at me with tear-filled eyes. I didn't know what to do. "Hammocks... are good," she said.

"Um... right."

"Hammocks... are great."

"Um... sure," I agreed awkwardly.

We stayed locked in position for another minute or so. I had a growing fear that if I left her like this, she might knock over all the dominoes in a fit of ritual suicide. Well, I didn't really think Sylphie was that kind of girl... But I was starting to feel like taking her up on the offer. She had her weird points, sure, but she was genuinely a good person.

"Ah..... okay. I'll sleep here," I conceded. "I might... end up liking the hammock, you know?"

"Yes!!!" Sylphie jumped for joy. The impact of the landing knocked down around 500 dominoes. Thankfully, the stoppers kept damage to a minimum. "It's okay! It's okay! All good! All good!"

"Sorry, though..."

"It's *all good*!" she insisted, as if no damage had been done at all. But it seemed like she still wanted to stay up late into the night lining up dominoes, so I went to sleep first, in the hammock.

"Sedam bira nal mafsa basilano menu yageh..." It was the middle of the night. Sylphie was reciting some kind of chant as she lined up the dominoes, one by one. I lay in the swaying hammock, working hard to sleep suspended in the air.

"Edo larnum..."

It was really distracting. Who could sleep, hanging feet off the ground, listening to someone talk like that?! ...Me, as it turned out, and surprisingly easy.

The hammock also turned out fine. I got my best sleep of the past few days, as a matter of fact. Swinging. Swaying. The rhythm had me drifting off immediately.

Hammocks are really something! Don't mess with hammocks! They're the most comfortable thing in the world!

Of course, when I woke up in the morning, still half-asleep, I ended up dropping out of the hammock, dealing a fatal blow to the dominoes below me. I think I took out a few hundred.

Sylphie didn't breathe a word of complaint, though; she just said, "I'll put them back up!" and smiled. (I did catch tears in her eyes, though.)

*You're a good person, Sylphie, I thought. But don't invite me over while you're doing a domino challenge!*

"Want to stay with me again tonight?!" she asked. Of course, this time, I had to turn her down.

The hammock had helped me recover a lot of my sleep debt, but I still took half the day off. I had to look for a new place. I'd been searching the Internet for the past few days and managed to put together some likely sites, so now all I had to do was call up a real estate company and see them in person.

I saw about five in central Amagi City: one-bedroom apartments, some with a separate living room, in the 60,000 to 70,000 per month price range. They all seemed good, but none of them quite felt "right." I didn't like being on the first floor, and the one on the second floor had a landlord that seemed annoying, and the one on the fifth floor was in an old building with no elevator—it was all that kind of thing. As I headed back to AmaBri for that evening's performance, I made up my mind to go back to square one and do more looking around next week.

As I entered the greenroom, I ran into Muse first.

"Ah..." There was an awkward silence between us. Things had been like this since she'd turned down my request the other night. We'd kept conversation and greetings to a bare minimum—Muse would try to talk to me, and I'd shut her down.

Childish, you say? Well, excuse me! I'm kind of sulking, here! It was awkward for me, too, and I just didn't know how to talk to her!

"S-Salama," Muse stuttered. "Did you go to the real estate office? How did the viewings go?"

"Meh," I shrugged. "Not great, I guess..."

"I see... so you don't have a place yet?"

"Nah. I'm gonna do some more searches and look around again next week." I played around on my smartphone (though I didn't have much to do) while I answered. At times like these, my smartphone was the perfect tool for feigning disinterest; just moving my thumbs around on the screen felt relaxing somehow. I know it's rude and all, but still...

"Salama... L-Look... I looked around for apartments, too," Muse told me. "There's a pretty good one the next town over..."

Her offer annoyed me. "I said I'm fine."

"But... but..."

"I'm not a kid," I said shortly. "I can find my own apartment."

"Ah... right." Muse fell silent.

I knew I was being petty. But in that moment, here's how it felt: *You're freaking out, watching me struggle to find a place to stay. You just want to find me something as soon as possible, so you can clear your own conscience. Well, forget you. I can't deal with your two-faced "friendship" right now.* I came close to actually telling her that, but fortunately, that's when Kobory and Sylphie entered the greenroom, ending our conversation. As for the performance after that—most customers probably didn't notice, but we were kind of out of sync.

Around closing time, Latifah-sama visited us in the greenroom. Moffle-senpai and Isuzu-chan were with her.

"I heard everything, Salama-san!" the princess said, her fists clenched. "That your home was set ablaze... If I had known earlier, surely I could have come to your aid. How could no one have informed me? I can hardly believe it..."

"Huh?" I said awkwardly. "Ah... yeah."

"Then, you have no place to stay?" Latifah-sama demanded. "You must come and stay with me, then. Ah, do not worry! You may stay as many days, as many months as you like!" The princess was blind, so she wasn't meeting my gaze, but her expression was determined.

Latifah-sama was a crazy nice person. She was also Maple Land royalty and lived in a beautiful room in the castle. It was a pretty natural offer for her to make, after hearing that my apartment burned down; the only thing stopping me from accepting was the hesitance on the faces of Moffle-senpai and Isuzu-chan. If I had to guess, I'd say they were the ones who'd been keeping the news about my apartment from her.

"Salama. Come here a minute, fumo. Just come on, fumo." I did as Moffle-senpai asked and left the room. Once we were alone in the hallway, he said: "Sorry to ask this, but would you mind turning her down, fumo?"

"Huh?" I asked in confusion. "I don't mind, but why?"

"Because it'll start a chain reaction, fumo."

".....?" I waited for him to explain.

"Latifah's a nice person. She won't stand idly by when she sees someone in trouble; she likely even meant it when she said she'd let you stay with her for months, fumo."

That sounded accurate. She really was a good person.

"But that won't be the end of it," Moffle went on. "If we set a precedent about letting Latifah humor sob stories, things will start to spiral."

"Huh? I'm not gonna take advantage of her..." I protested.

"Right. I know that, fumo. But worse people than you might—"

"Mii!" Just then, Tiramii-senpai walked in. "Latifah-sama! My house is ruined from water damage, mii! Can I stay with you? Don't

worry, mii! I won't ask you to rub my tummy!"

"Ah? Um, well..." Latifah-sama looked troubled.

Macaron-senpai arrived next, shouting, "I'm in trouble too, ron! The rumors that I can't pay my rent because of my child support are highly exaggerated! But it's still hard to keep up the utilities, ron! Latifah-sama! Please let me stay with you too, ron!"

"Ah? Er, well..." As Latifah-sama dithered, now Wanipii-senpai approached.

"I heard, pii! I heard there was a great apartment where we could live rent-free with a loli royal girl! Is this where we sign up, pii?!"

"Er, ah..." Latifah flailed. "I do not..."

"Please help my poor sad self, mii!"

"If you'll help me with my rent, I'll leave, ron!"

"I just want to sleep near you, pii!"



Latifah-sama seemed completely put out. That's when Moffle-senpai interrupted: "Go to it, Isuzu."

"Roger," she replied. Isuzu raised her musket and put precise, fatal shots into Tiramii-senpai, Macaron-senpai, and Wanipii-senpai each.

"That's what I was getting at, fumo," Moffle-senpai said, looking down at Tiramii-senpai's limp corpse. "That's the chain reaction I mean. An overly generous royal family is a sitting duck for these idiots, so we need to nip it in the bud. No sleep-overs, fumo. Come on, everyone, get out of here."

"What? Uncle! P-Please, you must..." Latifah-sama protested.

"Salama's fine, fumo. She's been staying with Kobory, Sylphie, and you, right?" he asked Isuzu-chan.

"Yes. It's a different place each night," she replied.

"She can work things out for a while yet then, fumo."

"I understand, but... Salama-san, forgive me." The princess bowed to me in apology.

"Ah... sure. It's okay, for real..." I genuinely felt a little disappointed, though. Latifah-sama's apartment was spacious, beautiful, full of guest rooms, and close to work (technically, it was in the middle of work). It was everything I could ask for. Plus, the princess was quiet, considerate, not weird at all (aside from her obsession with croquettes), and she probably slept soundly all night...

Ah, but it was what it was. I was starting to go back to my initial idea of sleeping outside... but just as I was steeling myself for that, Kanie-kun dropped by. "What's all the commotion?" he wanted to know. "I could hear the gunshots even in the basement..." He was carrying a pile of documents; he had probably come to discuss finances with either Latifah-sama or Isuzu-chan. "Did something happen?"

"Yes," said Isuzu, explaining the circumstances. "You see..."

Kanie-kun nodded. "I see. Hmm..." He put a hand to his chin and considered. His eyes flicked towards me from time to time, and by the end, he was scrutinizing me openly. He was a little scary when he did this sort of thing. He seemed to be thinking pretty hard about something, and even though he was younger than I was, I felt like he could see right through me. "By the way, what's Muse doing? Surely you could stay with her tonight."

"Ah? Um..." I floundered, unsure of how to answer him.

"You're friends, aren't you?" he asked pointedly.

"W-Well..."

"Ugh, forget it. I'll call her. Let's go." Kanie-kun immediately pulled out his smartphone and called Muse. I didn't even have a chance to stop him. "...Is this Muse? It's me. Salama doesn't have a place to stay tonight. Can she stay at your place? ...No, I don't care

about your landlady. Hm... ah-ha... mm-hm..."

Muse was clearly saying something on the other end of the phone, but I couldn't hear it.

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I don't care. Just let her stay. *Let her stay.* ...What? Didn't you hear me? All right, then, get ready for things to get a lot harder for you at our next planning conference! Maybe I'll just scrap all your suggestions. Oh, don't like that, do you? Yeah, so scary! Poor you! You'll be humiliated!"

It was really harsh. He was bringing all his power as acting manager to bear, to force the reluctant Muse into helping me. I hadn't thought Kanie-kun was that kind of person. I was feeling pretty grossed out by him!

But Isuzu-chan and Moffle-senpai—even Latifah-sama—simply watched in silence. They didn't try to scold him or protest. That was a shock, too—were they all just Kanie-kun's yes-men?!

"Hey... Kanie-kun..." I tried to interrupt him.

"Shut up," he said. "...Anyway, just do it. I'll be sending her your way now, so find a place nearby to meet her. That's an order! Goodbye." Kanie-kun cut off the one-sided call, and I launched into my protest.

"Are you nuts? How could you do that to her? It's power harassment!"

"Yeah," he shrugged, "maybe it is."

"It's not like I asked for this! How could you make Muse so uncomfortable?" I demanded. "And using my name to do it! What do you think you're doing?!"

"What do I think I'm doing?" Kanie-kun peered into my face. You could call his smile 'indomitable.' I was expecting cold indifference, but somehow it seemed like he was enjoying himself. "My job, of course. If you don't like it, submit your resignation. I want it on my desk tomorrow morning at 9:00."

"What..." I was so confused.

"This conversation is over," Kanie-kun announced. "Moffle, get her there."

"Roger that, fumo."

"Sento, you stay," he went on. "I need to talk to you and Latifah about the budget."

"Understood."

Moffle-senpai and Isuzu-chan both obediently did as they were told. Even Latifah-sama, though looking serious, kept her face pointed downward and said nothing.

"All right, Salama. Come on, fumo." While I was still staring in disbelief, Moffle-senpai took my arm and dragged me along.

He drove me out in the company car. I'm not exactly sure how he



drove with that stout, plush body of his... From the passenger seat, I couldn't even tell if his feet were reaching the pedals. It would be rude to stare, though, so I actively tried not to think about it.

As it turned out... he was a great driver! Moffle accelerated and decelerated smoothly; his steering was even, and he made a slow stop at the red lights. He was very precise when changing lanes; there was no stress at all for me in the passenger seat. I'd figured he would be the real reckless driver type, but he was actually a total class act.

"You know, fumo," Moffle-senpai said, after driving for a while down the road in front of the park. "Seiya heard the whole story from Isuzu, fumo."

"What?" I asked.

"Just the facts of it, anyway. No supposition." He was probably referring to the fact that I hadn't once stayed with Muse since my place got burned down.

"I think that's why Seiya put on the whole power harassment act," he explained. "But Isuzu, Latifah and I all saw through it. He's not that good an actor."

Ahh. So that's how it was. Kanie-kun had intentionally taken on the role of villain, thinking that forcing me and Muse together would solve the problem. Oh, how wonderful! What kind consideration! I could cry!

"...That's stupid," I said. Actually, I hated when people did favors for me like that. I wasn't helpless, and it wasn't any of his business. So annoying. Just leave me alone.

"Moffu. Stupid, is it? I thought you'd say that..." Moffle observed. "But I don't think he got the idea out of nowhere, fumo. You see..."

"I see... what?"

"After the fire, you stayed with Isuzu first, right?" Moffle said. "I was in the room with her when she called you, fumo."

"Oh?" I asked, suddenly curious.

"It was right after a meeting. I was making small talk with Randy and Kenjuro, and Isuzu was cleaning up some documents when she got a call... The call was from Muse, fumo."

"...?" I was surprised.

"It was a short conversation. It sounded like Muse was asking Isuzu to let you stay with her, fumo."

"What?" *Muse... called Isuzu-chan that night?*

"Moffu. Then Isuzu hung up, and called you right after, fumo. She said 'come stay with me.' So I think it's pretty clear, fumo."

"What?" I said again, feeling confused. "But still..."

I wasn't sure how to interpret what Moffle-senpai had just said. Could that also have been the reason Kobory and Sylphie had invited me for the next two days? Had Muse asked them all?

“Moffu. Well, you don’t have any friends, do you?”

“What?” I scoffed. “C’mon, I have plenty of friends...”

“Liar,” said Moffle. “And I’m sure you’re the kind of pain in the ass who tells her colleagues ‘I have tons of friends, so I’ll find a place to stay, easy!’ right?”

“Huh?” I asked innocently. “What are you talking about?” *Yeah*, I thought, *you’re dead-on*.

“Hmph. Whatever you say, fumo. A gentleman like me will just laugh at your vanity, but Kobory and Sylphie are different, fumo. They’ll take you seriously.”

“M... mmgh...”

“So even if Muse got worried and told them to invite you... you can’t really blame her, fumo.”

“.....” *What the hell?* I wondered. *How pathetic am I? Super pathetic, actually...*

“Moffu. Pretty lame, eh?” Moffle teased. “Salama-san’s cool girl image is all down the drain.”

“Just... Just butt out.” It took all I had to say that. Everyone was being super considerate of me, and what was I doing? It was pathetic. Super pathetic.

“Moffu,” he said happily. “That look of humiliation on your face is really something, fumo. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone; I’ll keep it for my own amusement, fumo.”

*Shut up*, I thought venomously. *Die, you plague rat*.

“Look at those defiant tears. You’re thinking, ‘Shut up. Die, you plague rat.’ Aren’t you, fumo?”

“O-Of course not...”

“No, I can tell, fumo!” Moffle-senpai’s conscientious driving took us to an intersection near Seiseki Tsubakigaoka, where Moffle-senpai let out a sigh. “...Anyway, I don’t know why Muse wouldn’t let you stay with her, fumo. So you need to stop moping and just ask her, fumo.”

“But...”

“You’re best friends, aren’t you, fumo?” The directness of the question caused me to avert my eyes. I felt like my face was on fire.

“You aren’t, fumo?” he asked again.

“Well, I...”

“Which is it, fumo?”

“W-Well...” I sniffed. “I think I’d... like to be...”

“Then talk to her. And quit making us worry, fumo.”

“Not like I asked you to...”

“Hmph.”

The neon of the suburbs rolled past. Signals and street lights blinked in the corners of my vision. I couldn’t even look at Moffle-

senpai head on.

“Um... Moffle-senpai?” I finally said.

“Yeah, fumo?”

“Are you being... um, kind to me?”

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Though the kindness is mostly meant for Muse. It’s only 10% directed at you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. “Well, thanks a ton.”

“What kind of half-hearted thank you is that?” he wanted to know. “Give it a little more spirit!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

“You did that on purpose, fumo! It’s getting on my nerves! Do you know that the people most frequently wounded in traffic accidents are in the passenger seat?!” Moffle demanded. “You’re at the mercy of my driving, you know!”

“Look, whatever,” I told him. “We’re almost to the meet-up point.”

Muse was standing in front of a conspicuous convenience store on a big thoroughfare near the station, wearing her street clothes: a baggy T-shirt and tight-fitting shorts. So cute... Muse noticed our car, and waved as hard as she could.

“Oho, there she is,” Moffle chuckled. “...And Salama, don’t tweet about this conversation, all right?”

“Oh, come on!” I protested. “You know I wouldn’t!”

“No, you would, fumo. ‘Moffle gave me a lecture about my working relationships. What a bossy boss,’ and such.”

“I wouldn’t!” *I’m not that insensitive! Besides, my smartphone battery is down to 12%... Well, of course... If it had been over 50%, I really might have posted a grievance or two.*

Moffle-senpai let me out, and once his car was out of sight, Muse said: “Salama... seriously, don’t tell anyone, okay?” That was the first thing out of her mouth. She didn’t even say hello.

“Don’t tell anyone... about what?” I asked.

“I can’t really explain it... Just promise me you won’t tell anyone.”

Things had already been awkward between us lately, so I didn’t know how to react to that. To be honest, I figured the second we met, she’d have a few nasty words for me... I mean, this had only happened because Kanie-kun strong-armed her into it.

“I’m... staying in a boarding house,” Muse admitted.

“I heard.”

“It’s just the standard thing, okay? It’s a normal house, but they rent out rooms on the second floor to girls...”

“Ah, yeah. I’ve heard about that,” I said. “It’s the kind of arrangement that lets both the landlady and the renters feel more comfortable.”

“Yeah. The rent is pretty low, too... So being able to stay there has

been a huge help,” Muse said earnestly as she walked down the lit-up street.

“So, what’s secret about it?”

“Well... the landlady, okay? She’s a doctor.”

“R-Right...” *What’s the problem with that?* I wondered. *It’s a great job.*

“Ah, but I’ve never been her patient, okay?! Not once! I mean it! ...Just, it results in a lot of misunderstandings, and I get embarrassed... and maybe it’s not fair to the landlady, it’s just, it’s really not what you’d think! Just keep that in mind!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about...” I said, feeling bewildered.

“Just keep it secret, okay?” Muse insisted. “Don’t ever tell anyone!”

“I won’t, okay?” *Why the hell would I tell anyone?* I was feeling a little sad about how little she trusted me. But just as I was sighing about that...

“Here’s the boarding house...” Muse said, and stopped. Her head was bowed and she was as red as a beet.

I finally got a look at the hospital, which was a large house made of reinforced concrete. There were three entrances: one for the residents, one for boarders, and one for patients.

The sign on the hospital read: “Proctologist.”

My eyes opened wide. *Proctologist?*

“Like I said, I’m really not a patient, okay?” Muse insisted, talking fast. “Okay?! I’m not! I just live in the same building... Salama, why won’t you say something? Are you freaked out? You are, aren’t you?! But it’s really not true! Say something! Hey! Please!” Muse clung to me, eyes filled with tears.

“Well, this... explains a lot...” I trailed off.

“Ah... what do you mean by that?!” she wailed.

Of course she couldn’t say it. All the tension flooded out of my body. What had I spent all those days depressed for? A proctologist, huh? Of course she couldn’t admit to that. If I were in Muse’s shoes, I wouldn’t admit to it either. Not a chance in hell.

“Well, “ I explained, “I was just thinking ‘ah, that fits.’”

“I-Is that a pun?!” she choked out. “Are you enjoying this?!”

“No,” I said, “of course not!”

“But, but...”

*It’s not a pun! It’s a coincidence! An act of God! Stop twisting everything! You’re making me want to cry!* I thought. *Well, cry from laughter, maybe...*

“Salama... don’t hate me!”

“I’m not going to! Now, quit annoying the neighbors with your

shouting and let's go inside. Okay? Okay?"

"Yeah... I really am sorry."

"And why are you apologizing?" I demanded. "Knock it off."

"But... but..."

"I already know everything." Yes, it all added up now. My spirit felt the lightest it had in several days. "I'm the one who should be sorry."

"But..."

"Go in, go in!" I urged her. "Hurry, hurry!"

"O-Okay..." Dragging her feet, Muse walked in the entrance for the boarding house.

I let out a sigh, and then followed her.

Muse's apartment was pretty large and very clean. The futon she laid out for me was fluffy and comfortable.

I used her shower, and when I came out she was already asleep in bed. Of course, I had to take pictures. *Ugh. She's so trusting I could die!*

The shutter sound woke Muse up, and she sleepily said, "hey, cut it out," and we spent a little time winding down together. Before she went back to sleep, we had a nice talk about romance and life.

I even got to have the exchange I'd dreamed about, where I asked, "Muse, are you asleep?" and she clearly was.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of sparrows chirping outside. Muse was making miso soup! She wore a thin apron over her around-the-house clothes and said, "Morning, Salama. Breakfast will be ready soon!"



*A housewife act? Is she trying to kill me?!* I wondered. Well, I had been pretty much ignoring her and giving her the cold shoulder the past few days...

On the way to work, we said hi to the landlady, whom we happened to meet out front. She seemed nice, and she said, "Come by any time." Pretty cool.

Muse shot her a leisurely, "See you later, Auntie!" They seemed to be close. But that old woman was a proctologist?

I don't know why, but I felt like I had grown up that day.

**[The End]**

# I'm Not All Rotten, Okay?

I'm Kobory, the Spirit of Earth. I work at Elementario (formerly Aquario). Do you believe in fairies? Well, of course, I guess you'd have to... Muse-san, Salama-san, Sylphie-san and I are spirits of the four basic elements, and we come from magical lands just like Mofflesenpai and his friends.

By the way, apparently there's been a strange rumor going around in our cast lately: They say there's a fairy in the park. I don't really understand what they mean, of course... We've always had fairies here, working their fingers to the bone! The first time I heard about it, I'm sure a big question mark appeared over my head. It would be like someone at a normal company saying, "I hear there are humans working here."

"C'mon, girlie. Don't go looking so confused." I was talking to the head of the maintenance department, Wrenchy-kun-san. We were on a break from work, shooting the breeze in a corner of the underground passageway.

He and I weren't especially close, but for some reason, we tended to see a lot of each other. Whenever he needed to talk about the Elementario facilities, I was always the one he seemed to come to first, and this time, I just happened to say hello to him in the break room while he was enjoying a can of coffee.

"'Fairy' is just a figure of speech. What I mean is, there's somethin' strange goin' on around here." That rough Tokyo dialect was how Wrenchy-kun-san always talked. He looked like a large wrench with arms and legs, wearing a headband, and he spoke like your typical workman. He looked after all of the park's facilities—the power, the air circulation, the water pipes, the sound system, the lighting—and he was very reliable, to the point that even Kanie-san respected him.

"What do you mean, 'something strange'?" I wanted to know.

"I wouldn't be callin' it a fairy if I knew!" he insisted. "I'm just sayin', there's some strange things afoot that a man can't explain."

"Do you mean like a gremlin?" I wondered.

"The hell's that?"

"It's a mortal legend about imps that sabotage machinery... World War II bombers and things like that," I explained. "Inexplicable breakdowns they suffered would be said to have been the work of gremlins."

Wrenchy-kun-san just stared at me. "You know the strangest



things, girlie.”

“Well...”

“But, fine... it’s somethin’ like that, then. The fairy plays pranks, but nothin’ bad like that. It only seems to do good things, matter of fact.”

“Ahh. Is that so?” *So it’s like a reverse gremlin*, I thought, *A fairy that only does good things—that sounds nice.*

“It happened to me once, y’see. I’m sure it was the fairy behind it, any rate.”

“Did you see it?”

“Naw, I didn’t see it,” Wrenchy-kun-san admitted. “It was... ah, back in March. You remember the stadium in the second park?”

“Yes, I do.” Of course I did. Using that stadium to host a soccer game was what had gotten us to our minimum attendance quota, allowing us to survive for another year. The land of the second park had since been sold to a mega-corporation called Malmart, but that stadium was AmaBri’s savior in a way.

“Something happened when we held the soccer game there... Something that don’t quite add up.” Wrenchy-kun-san went on to explain: Just before the soccer game, there had been a problem with the lighting. They’d spent all night working, and early in the morning, the lighting went out; it wouldn’t respond to any of their efforts to get it back on.

Naturally, Wrenchy-kun-san and the rest of the stadium staff tried desperately to find the source of the problem, but it was an old facility, and progress was grueling. While they tried one thing and another, the park opened its doors. That meant there were eight hours left until the match started.

“I do remember that...” I mused.

“Had us in a cold sweat, I tell you. Just before noon, we finally found the source of the trouble in the control room PC...” The PC was an extremely old model, which Wrenchy-kun-san explained was beyond even him. “It wasn’t even a Windows system. It was a PC-98, y’know? Ever heard of it, girlie?”

“Oh... From NEC?” I guessed.

“Oh... so ya do know it,” said Wrenchy-kun-san, sounding surprised.

Before Windows PCs became popular, such machines were used widely throughout Japan. There was even a time when the country was dominated by NEC’s PC-9800 series, but that was about 25 years ago.

“The company that made the control system folded ages ago, and nobody knew how to use PCs from that era... so what were we supposed to do?” Wrenchy-kun-san’s gaze became distant. “I went at it

about thirty minutes. Then I left for a bit, and when I came back a little bit later, I found it fixed, right there.”

“Ahh...”

“I’m telling you, two or three lines of code were rewritten,” he insisted. “Seemed like it was an issue with the number of lights and their output... after testing, see, we’d swapped out about 50 old light bulbs, and that’s what was causing the problem. But there’s no way that anyone but me knew about it.”

“So, you think it was a fairy?” I asked.

“What else could it be? Stranger things’ve happened. Anyway, those’re the kind of things they’re talkin’ about.”

“I see. That is quite mysterious.” I tried to sound neutral, without a trace of sarcasm, but Wrenchy-kun-san still seemed hurt by my phrasing.

“What, girly, you don’t believe me?”

“No, I do...”

“That’s a pretty indifferent response if ya do,” he mumbled.

“I’m sorry. This is just how I am.” I was able to smile when I was on stage, but generally speaking, I’m fairly inexpressive. My second most common expression is probably looking put out when Salama-san and Sylphie-san go too far.

“Well, never you mind. ...Sorry to bother you with an old man’s shaggy dog stories.”

“It didn’t bother me,” I insisted. “It was very entertaining.”

“You don’t look so entertained to me... But, well, so long.” Wrenchy-kun-san left, sighing to himself.

I heard a similar story about the “fairy” that same day from Sento Isuzu-san, while I was taking a breather after having finished my day’s work. I’d parted ways with my colleagues, and had just ordered a baked fish lunch in the employee cafeteria when I saw her. She had already finished her meal and was enjoying a cup of tea while she fiddled with a laptop; she seemed to be working.

Normally, I’d have sat down in a seat far away from Isuzu-san and limited our interactions to casting her a smile any time our eyes met. But Wanipii-senpai was also present, sitting in his usual seat, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to him today.

It’s not that I don’t get along with Wanipii-senpai... Things were just a little awkward between us. We’d been at a cast drinking party the other day; Wanipii-senpai happened to be sitting at our table, and Salama-san was teasing him, asking him which of the four girls of Elementario was his type. Wanipii-senpai was pretty drunk, and he ended up saying “If I *have* to name someone” and choosing me. It wasn’t anything that serious; at the time, I just laughed it off as silly small talk.

I respect Wanipii-senpai a lot. It took someone really special to stay in this kind of work for so long, and there's a lot a reserved person like me could learn from someone like him. But as a romantic partner... well, I'm sorry to say it, but... maybe if I lowered my standards a lot, it wouldn't be out of the question, but generally speaking, I wouldn't go for him. After all, he was the kind of person who would spend six figures on his favorite idol, and if he found out she had an overnight partner, he'd valiantly sweep in to defend her honor. He just took it so seriously. I couldn't take it.

Maybe it's because I read lots of manga about beautiful characters that people get the wrong idea, but I'm not actually very superficial when it comes to real-life people. Wanipii-senpai was okay for me, looks-wise. It's just...

I'm sorry. I know it's the height of arrogance for a plain-looking spirit like me to act picky about men. Forgive me. I'll watch myself in the future.

Anyway, that night in the cafeteria, I was a little hesitant to sit next to Wanipii-senpai, so I just shot him a nod and moved in Isuzu-san's direction. I thought it would look like a very natural gesture. Wanipii-senpai would probably think, "Oh, she has to talk to Isuzu-chan? That doesn't bother me, pii." He actually just kept his eyes cast downward, skewering the hamburg steak on his plate again and again, but I was sure he understood.

"Kobory. Are you finished for today?" Isuzu-san asked. Her eyes were locked on her screen.

"Yes," I said. "Are you working, Isuzu-san?"

"Yes, I'm making a want ad. But I'm afraid it's going poorly... None of the adjustments I make to the design seem to work out," she sighed. "I wonder why..."

"May I see?" I asked her.

"Yes," said Isuzu, handing her laptop to me. "I'd appreciate a candid opinion."

The laptop felt heavy. That was natural, since it was such an old model, but for some reason, Isuzu-san was able to hold it very easily... That strength must have served her well when she was pointing that bulky musket at Moffle-san and the others.

"....." I didn't know what to say. The want ad's design was almost completely identical to the one they had used in April. One could say it was a reliable design... One could also say it was boring. They hadn't even adjusted the copy; 'If you've got what it takes, come join us!!' and such. It made it sound like they were hiring people for a blue collar bar. "Er, can I ask... What part were you adjusting?"

"Well..." Isuzu-san sounded less than confident "...previously, it said, 'Come join us if you've got what it takes.' I reversed it to try to

make it sound more catchy, and I also added two exclamation points.”

In other words, it went from “Come join us if you’ve got what it takes” to “If you’ve got what it takes, come join us!!” And that was it.

“You... really worked hard on this, then?” I hazarded a guess.

“Yes,” she told me. “But Kanie-kun and Tricen’s reactions were less than favorable. Even though I strengthened the illustration as well...”

“You mean, this image of Mirai-kun’s face?” I asked. There was an illustration of Mirai-kun in the corner of the want ad. He was a veteran member of the fairy cast who looked like a globe with arms and legs. He was a very minor character, who I don’t think many people recognized.

“That’s right,” Isuzu agreed. “I thought about using Lord Moffle, but since this is what we used before...”

*Anything but Mirai-kun*, I thought. His expression in the illustration looked like he was mocking the reader, too—which was, in fact, a good reflection of his actual personality, but... it didn’t put AmaBri in a good light.

Isuzu-san seemed to be aware of this, too, and I guess that’s why she looked so depressed. She whispered, with a sigh, “I wonder if the fairy will save me again.”

“Fairy?” I asked.

“Ah. Forgive me... I’m just venting,” she admitted. “It was inappropriate.”

“I see,” I said neutrally. “Could you tell me more about that?”

“About what?”

“About the fairy,” I clarified. “Wrenchy-kun-san mentioned it, too. There are apparently rumors going around.”

“Well... it has nothing to do with the advertisement.”

“Right, but you seem to have hit a creative wall,” I pointed out. “Banging your head against it won’t bring out better ideas. You need to get your mind off of it.” To be honest, I wasn’t really very interested in the fairy. I’d just pushed the topic because it sounded like a good way to get her mind off of her problem.

“I see... I suppose you have a point. Allow me to explain.” Isuzu closed her laptop and straightened up. I hadn’t expected it to be anything that serious, but... “Do you remember when we were recruiting people in April? We received quite a few applicants then. Over thirty, starting with Adachi-san and the others. But since May, we’ve had less than ten. It was as if, in April, we had someone’s help.”

“Someone’s... help?” I asked.

“Yes. All that I did was upload the hiring information to the park’s official page and put the want ad up on several job recruitment sites. But that by itself had very little effect.” But starting a few days later, she explained, it had ended up posted to various message boards, with

links and videos all over social media, which far increased the scope of the ad. “I still don’t know who did it.”

“Ahh...”

“The recruiting notice video was also redone. The copy was left intact, but the design was fixed to be prettier, easier to read, and more eye-catching... At first I thought that Kanie-kun had done it, but he appeared to be as ignorant as I was. It’s surely someone in the park, but...”

“You think that the ‘fairy’ was behind it?”

“That’s what I tentatively choose to call it,” she told me. “Since the one behind it hasn’t named themselves, I’m sure they merely did it on a whim... It’s hardly something I can count on, is it?”

“Yes... I suppose not,” I agreed.

“I’ve heard similar stories from others, and they all simply refer to it as ‘the fairy,’” Isuzu said. “Have you ever had such an experience?”

“Well. Elementario might have...” I said doubtfully. “I don’t really know.”

“I see.”

“Well... did talking about the fairy help?” I asked after a while. “Did it get your mind off of things?”

“I’m not sure...” she sighed. “It may have just made me feel even more incompetent.”

“I see... I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t your fault.”

“.....” I didn’t know what else to say.

“.....” Isuzu-san fell quiet and returned to work. I silently went back to my meal as well.

Things felt a little awkward. It was hard to eat dinner next to someone you weren’t that close with and couldn’t really talk to. The baked fish was my one salvation; the need to eat it all neatly, by removing the small bones and skin, helped to fill the empty space.

Isuzu-san apparently came from a highly ranked noble family in Maple Land, which made her seem unapproachable for a commonplace spirit like me (though Muse-san didn’t seem to mind much at all). Even Isuzu-san’s use of language suggested nobility; You didn’t see many women who talked the way she did, nowadays. Most women sounded a little pretentious when they used words like “merely,” or “quite,” but Sento Isuzu-san worked them into her speech very naturally. She was always completely sincere; a very rare breed.

By the way, I was born in a small magical realm known as the Elementium Republic. My family lives in a hot springs town where they’ve run a traditional-style inn for generations, and I have two older brothers and a little sister. My parents and grandparents all told me to quit this starving dancer business, come home, and find a

husband, but I don't really want to. After all, they live deep in the country, over three hours away from the nearest manga store. They don't have fiber-optic Internet, either. And when you order things online, it takes at least three days for them to reach you.

In contrast, my current apartment is thirty minutes from Shinjuku, and fifty minutes from Akihabara or Ikebukuro. I could order something at night and have it sitting in my delivery box when I got home from work the next day. The mortal city of Amagi was really the perfect environment for me. So for as long as AmaBri stood and I was still employed there, I wasn't going to let it go.

Sorry, I sort of got off the subject... The point is, it's awkward for a workaday spirit like me to spend a lot of time sitting in silence, picking at baked fish, across from a celebrity like Isuzu-san.

"All right," Isuzu-san said suddenly.

"Huh?" I asked, caught off-guard.

"I understand why I'm frustrated. It's... 9:00 pm. It's been over eight hours since my last bath. That simply won't do." She closed her laptop and stood up.

"You're going to take a bath?"

"Yes, a bath," Isuzu-san said, placing her damp, pre-meal hand towel on top of her head. Apparently Isuzu-san was from a family of kappa, so maybe she found this gesture soothing... at least, that's what I assumed. "Thank you for your help, Kobory. I'm going to take a bath and then approach the design with fresh eyes."

"Ahh..."

"If you'll excuse me." Isuzu-san cleaned up her work tools, bussed her teacup, then left.

Once she was gone, I noticed that Wanipii-senpai was looking at me. Oh, but he immediately looked away... What an awkward person. A person has 200 degrees of sight, so even without turning my eyes directly to him, it was easy for me to tell which way he was looking. Most women know when someone's looking at their skirt hem or at their cleavage, by the way, so watch out for that.

I probably should have just talked to Wanipii-senpai, but my baked fish was now down to the bones, so I decided not to. I just finished off my lukewarm tea and left. "See you tomorrow," I said to him.

Wanipii-senpai just grumbled, "Ah... pii," with his eyes focused downward. There was something a little bit cute about the gesture. Very educational.

I probably would have felt better if he had asked me, "Kobory-chan, what were you talking to Isuzu-chan about, pii?!" but he didn't. Of course, I'm just a plain Jane spirit, and it was probably awkward for him, too. I felt very apologetic about it. I'm sorry.

I had stopped by my locker in the women's changing room and was getting ready to go home, when I got a text message from Dornell-senpai. 《Kobory-chan. Are you still in the park? There's something I'd like to discuss with you...》

Dornell-senpai was a Fairy of Flowers. Many years ago, he'd been the host of the Flower Adventure attraction, but since then he'd spent ten years as a NEET living under the second park, and he'd only recently come back to us. Since the Flower Adventure was now hosted by Tiramii-senpai, he hardly ever appeared in front of the guests anymore, but it somehow turned out that he was a talented stage director, so he was now handling the park's live shows. He'd helped Elementario out with our staging a few times as well, so I respected him a whole lot.

I replied right away. 《No problem. On my way now.》

《Thanks a lot, nell. I'm in the central stage's MCR, so meet me there, nell. I can't seem to get a hold of Muse-chan, nell.》

Muse-san was our attraction's leader, but she used a certain smartphone service which frequently put her out of range. It was fine when she was in the park, but it was impossible to get in touch with her while she was on her commute back home. That was probably why he was having trouble.

I hurried to the central stage's MCR (Master Control Room). You can't see it from the spectator seats, but it's located on one of the middle floors of Maple Castle and gives a perfect view of the stage. All facets of a show can be controlled remotely from there, and we really couldn't put on a show without it. It's a little like the control tower at an airport.

I jogged down the underground passageway and took the Maple Castle elevator up to the MCR. I found Dornell-senpai there, apparently in the middle of a fight with some equipment, connecting and disconnecting a true spaghetti of wires.

“Dornell-senpai?” I questioned.

“Ah, there you are, nell,” he said, untangling himself from the wires. He sounded exhausted and dejected.

“What's the matter?”

“I'm having trouble with the sound system again,” he admitted.

“Again?”

“Yeah. Just like during Golden Week...”

“Ahh...” I remembered. The park had been set to unveil a huge new live show in April, at the start of Golden Week. It had the baffling title of ‘A (AmaBri) Fight Begins! The Moffle that Fell to Earth!’ While it sounded like a ripoff of the first episode of some 90s anime, they had actually put a lot of effort into the show itself, which had been really impressive. It had all come together after days and nights of

rehearsal, and we'd put our hearts into it, hoping to show everyone what the "new" AmaBri was all about.

But just before the first live performance, we'd had some trouble with the sound system... Every minute we spent forcing the guests to wait was nerve-wracking. Fortunately, thanks to part-timer Chujo Shiina-san's beautiful voice, we'd managed to buy time to get the machinery running again... But that nightmare of a first show still hung over us all.

"After today's performance, I ran multiple tests with the machinery... and there's a new issue I can't figure out," Dornell said. "I'm still looking into it, but... at this rate, we might need to change some aspects of the new show we were planning to open next week."

"Ah..."

"More specifically, we'll have to cut you guys, nell."

"What?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"Don't get mad, nell," he pleaded. "Just hear me out. I'm saying..." According to Dornell-senpai, they were going to have to cut half of the speaker channels. But they couldn't take out Moffle-senpai and the park's other main characters, and they needed sound effects and music... and the announcer channel was important, too... Which left the scene in which we appear (in a place a little ways away from the central stage) as the one that would have to be removed.

Hmm. I understood. We could appear in the show, at least, but we couldn't make sound. It was the kind of scene where, if we weren't careful, the guests might hear the sound of the motors of the elevator instead.

"I'm really sorry, nell! But I've been thinking about the structure, and that's the only place we can cut! Please, try to roll with it!" Dornell-senpai was practically groveling.

I quickly crouched down beside him to try to comfort him. "I understand, really. Please calm down..."

"Kobory-chan!" he wailed.

"I'll let everyone know," I reassured him. "Please, don't worry." To be honest, balancing our Elementario performances with the live shows was kind of a burden as it was. Muse-san, Salama-san, and Sylphie-san were all trying their hardest, but we were also exhausted.

We couldn't even go out on our off days; we just laid around at home and slept. We'd talked about the four of us going somewhere to hang out, but we could never go very far. On our most recent day off, we'd had some tea at the cafe in front of Amagi Station, then immediately split up. We would have been better off staying in bed. Given all that, while it was a shame to get cut out of the live show, it was also a bit of a relief.

"Thanks a lot, nell! But it's not for sure just yet..."



“Huh?”

“It’s just what will happen if we can’t solve the equipment issue,” Dornell said. “If we fix it, you’ll be able to perform, so don’t be disappointed just yet, nell.”

“Ahh...” What in the world... These sorts of ambiguities are the hardest things for a performer to deal with. You want people to just say ‘no!’ when it won’t work and ‘yes!’ when it will. It’s hard to get your feelings in order, otherwise.

“It’s possible it might still work out, nell. So please, nell. Make sure everyone in Elementario knows the situation, nell!”

“O-Okay...” I agreed shakily. But then, what should we do about the next few weeks of practice? I guessed that we’d just have to keep at it... It was really uncomfortable.

“Ahh... It’s trouble, nell...” Dornell-senpai muttered, ignoring my own concerns. “It’s times like these I wish the fairy would come again...”

“The fairy?” I questioned. *This again?*

“Yeah, nell. Remember that trouble we had with the first live show in April, nell?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “That was very difficult, wasn’t it?”

“There’s a theory that it was the fairy that came along and fixed it, nell. We were still struggling to figure things out when the problem just righted itself. We still don’t know how it happened, nell.”

“I thought there was a problem with one of the connections?”

“Maybe so! But I think it was the fairy who fixed it, nell! It’s the only way it could resolve itself at such a perfect moment!”

I’d never liked the idea of asking for divine intervention when things got tough. I thought people should fix technical problems themselves. But seeing the desperation in Dornell-senpai’s eyes made me hesitant to point that out.

“...Anyway, I understand the situation,” I finally said. “We’ll keep it in mind, so for now, please focus on making the new live show a success.”

“Thank you! Thank you, nell! I’ll take you to Kurobe Dam some time as thanks, nell!” I forgot to mention it, but Dornell-senpai is a dam geek. Yes, a dam... geek. I supposed that Kurobe Dam must be a pretty good dam if he was recommending it. I wasn’t sure why—maybe something to do with the amount of water it stored, or the views of the release? *Dam Manga* artist Inoue Yoshihisa would probably know. The Spirit of Water, Muse, would also probably get it, but as a Spirit of Earth, I was completely in the dark.

Still, it seemed like this was something I should express gratitude about. “Okay. If we can make time,” I told him.

“I promise, nell! You’ll love it, nell!” I didn’t really want him to

promise, but the conversation wasn't going to end unless I smiled and agreed. That dam must be far away, though, right? We'd probably have to stay the night, wouldn't we? Staying in a hotel with my boss... I wasn't really a fan of the idea.

"Um, anyway," I said. I should be going..." I left Dornell-senpai, who was still bowing and scraping on the floor, and the MCR, behind. I wondered why I was hearing so much about "the fairy" today?

On my way home, I got a message from our head of administration, Tricen-senpai. Tricen-senpai had apparently been worrying about content for the PV that would be going out in September, and he wasn't sure what to do with Elementario. Regarding, well, you know... The sexiness of our costumes, and whether he should push it, or play it down to make it more family-oriented... That was the dilemma he was facing.

《Yeah, I'm struggling. The fairy arranged things last time in just the right way, but...》 Tricen-senpai told me in his message. More about the "Fairy," huh?

《What do you mean?》 I replied.

《The truth is, the last PV we put out was not entirely my work. I went through a lot of trial-and-error until I hunched over and passed out.》

A normal person would refer to that as "pitched over."

《Then I uploaded the video, although I had little faith in it.》

《Ahh...》 I replied.

《I fell asleep, woke up, and looked on the video site once more, though it took substantial courage to do so... After all, in the version that I edited, I had worked hard on Isuzu-chan's panty shot, Salamasan's cleavage shot, and such like.》

《.....》 I had nothing to say to that last statement.

《I was even worried that perhaps I had overdone it. ...Yes.》 Tricen-senpai really was a creep. He was casually turning us into sex objects.

《Um,》 I typed back.

《No! Please, do not get the wrong idea! I, Tricen, was forced to hunch over in indecision! That is why it was a struggle to decide if I should upload that video!》

But he had still uploaded it... Tricen-senpai's concerns were probably more along the lines of "Will men dig these particular shots?" than any matter of taste.

《Kobory-san. Are you angry?》

《No.》 I was lying, of course. I was, in fact, a little angry with him. 《Anyway, what was that you said about a fairy?》

《Yes! Exactly! Let's get back to the subject. The morning after! Trembling in fear, I watched the video I uploaded the night before...

and it was fixed brilliantly!»

«The PV, you mean?» I asked.

«Yes! The PV's content had been brilliantly moderated! Thanks to that, we managed to avoid blowback from the local mothers. Thinking back now, I think that was the platonic ideal form of that PV!»

Tricen-senpai was asserting that a video, tinkered with by a complete stranger without permission, was "perfect." That seemed like a problem in and of itself, but...

«I have never been witness to such a miracle before. Ashamed as I am, I find myself thinking, "I wish the fairy could visit me again..."»

«I understand how you feel, but...» I responded. «I don't think it's right to rely on a total stranger like that.»

«Hmm. I'm forced to hunch over from the harshness of your words, Kobory-san.»

«I'm sorry. But I'm really not sure what to say when people talk to me about these "fairy" things.» Maybe it's because we were talking over text, but my tone was coming out a little more pointed than usual.

«You are indeed correct, yes. So... what should we do? Should we push the sexuality, or the family appeal?»

«Let's see,» I typed back. «I think you should show restraint.»

«What do you mean?»

«I understand wanting to push sexiness, but I don't think it's good to have it be on screen for too long. The longer it's out there, the greater the risk that you'll upset the women watching the video. If you keep just a little sexiness for a small period of time, that should be okay. Just scatter cuts of one or two frames in about three locations, and that should do it.»

«Ahh...» he replied.

«Not so little that it feels subliminal, but if it's just twelve frames it should be enough that fathers sick of dealing with family-oriented stuff will go snap to attention, I think.»

«I see! How educational! But Kobory-san, where did you learn such things?»

«Oh, nowhere special. I just watch watch a lot of movies and TV shows and such.» Anime ones, of course. Sometimes, even now, when I'm exhausted from work, I search job offers in the anime industry. I've always sort of wanted a job as an editor. Of course, I'd never quit my current job... I think hobbies should remain hobbies. I'm not naive. The job hunt is just kind of a daydream.

«Hmm. You have given me very concrete advice, but I still have very little in the way of confidence. Do you think that I, the humble Tricen, could truly be capable of such precision editing?»

«Well... You won't know until you try, will you?» I asked him.

《Yes. Thank you very much! I, Tricen, shall do my best, while hoping for the “fairy” to appear!》 It sounded like he was still waiting for someone else to save him, but that wasn’t for me to comment on.

《Well, goodbye.》

《Yes! Thank you for all your help! And Kobory-san, if I may ask, in order to keep my humble morale up, could you write it like “Go! ☆ Go! ☆” please?》

I typed in the phrase, my actual expression completely blank.

《Go! ☆ Go! ☆》

《Ah, I am thrilled! I, Tricen, could fight ten years on the strength of your words alone!》

If that was all it took, I could have written ten more Go! ☆s. But it seemed like a pain, so I decided not to. 《I’m glad to hear it. Goodbye.》

《Kobory-san, may blessings of the Goddess Libra be upon you!》

《ツ》

Tricen-senpai seemed extremely excited about something. I just hoped he could make a proper PV.

I arrived at my local Moyori Station around 11:00 at night. The shopping street there tended to pack up early, so most everything was closed. I strolled into a nearby convenience store and did a little browsing of the manga magazines. Then I put some bread, a banana, and some milk in my basket for breakfast. I had a candy craving, too, but snacking at midnight was suicide (from a weight perspective), so I refrained and wandered away from the snack corner.

I suddenly realized that I only had 1,000 yen on hand, so I got some money out of the ATM. That’s when I noticed some customers who seemed like a couple flirting in the alcohol corner nearby.

“Huh? You can’t drink that much.”

“It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“You’re going to keep going?”

“I can handle it. I mean it.”

It was a very common, very silly conversation. If I were a more high-ranked Spirit of Earth with the kind of powerful magic that let me rot organic matter, I admit, I would have rotted the drinking snacks in the couple’s basket... maybe mixing in some E.coli bacteria. Of course, I wasn’t powerful enough to do that.

I did have the power to make food rot quicker than normal, and if I concentrated, I could move up the expiration date on the couple’s food from September 12th to September 9th. But that seemed pointless, so I didn’t bother. It would just make me kind of pathetic, and I didn’t want to acknowledge that I was jealous of the couple.

I paid at the register. The part-time worker recognized me and smiled. He was probably a student, and a plain but earnest-looking

person. He'd helped me out before when I was having trouble with the copier (though I was very careful to make sure he didn't see the drafts I was copying). It was a purely solicitous smile, of course, but it gave me a little pang in my heart.

"That will be 755 yen," he said. As I opened my wallet and searched for a 50 yen coin and a 5 yen coin, the clerk said to me: "Working again today?"

"Huh?" I said, surprised.

"Ah... s-sorry..." he stuttered. "You always come in... at this time, so..."

"....." I didn't answer him. I didn't have a 5 yen coin, so all I was able to do was say "sorry," in an apologetic, fading voice. He seemed like such a good person, but once I was offstage, I couldn't even force a smile. It was pathetic. I paid, got 245 yen in change, then left the convenience store.

"Thank you for coming!" The part-time worker's voice sounded louder than usual, for some reason.

On the way back home from the convenience store, I fell into dismal thoughts: the part-time worker might be interested in me. Well, I was probably just being too self-conscious, but for some reason, my heart was racing.

All kinds of fantasies ran through my mind. What if the next time I went to the convenience store, the worker got up his courage and gave me a letter? Or what if I got accosted by drunks, and he came to save me? No, even without that kind of melodrama... what if he just managed to say hello, and started up a little conversation? Of course, that wasn't going to happen.

Either way, I was probably going to stay away from that convenience store for a while. I just felt awkward, and I could probably avoid the times when that clerk was there. I doubted I'd be able to greet him with a smile by the next time I saw him. I'd just freak out and bow repeatedly and he'd think "that girl is so weird." Probably... no, almost certainly.

It was always that way. I'd been born an introvert, and it was hard for me to interact with people. I'd decided to work as a dancer, a job so unsuited to me, to try to fix that part of myself. Thanks to that, lately, I was no longer afraid of appearing in front of hundreds of guests. Of course, it helped that I had three friends with me, but... I'd managed to acquire a little courage.

Still, I had a long way to go. No matter how hard I worked, I couldn't really say "I did that!" Likewise, "that's my accomplishment!" was something I absolutely couldn't say. That was why today had been so hard for me. I don't like to lie, but while worming my way around it, I guess that's what I'd ended up doing...

That's right. The "fairy" was me, Kobory. The one who fixed the lighting program in the second park stadium that Wrenchy-kun-san mentioned—that was me. I happened to be there at the time, carrying in some unrelated equipment. I saw Wrenchy-kun-san leave his seat in a panic, and while he was gone, I played with it a little bit. We'd used an old Epson machine in our family inn... and I'd been the one in charge of it. That was back when I was in elementary school.

We used a lot of electronics at home, too, and we had a large open-air bath, so I'd recognized the output problem immediately. I just messed with a few numbers, and soon enough... Thankfully, it was apparently useful, and the stadium was able to function properly. But I couldn't say "I'm the one who did that."

I'm also the person who helped Isuzu-san with the want ad she was so worried about. Her want ad—it made it seem like such a boring government job. No one in the wider world was hearing about it. I was worried as well, so I'd ended up posting the link here and there, hoping to see it get spread all over. The design also wasn't great, so I just messed with the image data a little bit. And while I had a real internal debate about this, I also ended up posting it on various message boards anonymously. (Of course, I never do that for my own doujinshi!)

Thanks to that, the want ad had ended up spread far and wide. Applications had started to fall in May, though... I felt really bad about that. If I'd been more careful to follow up, Isuzu-san wouldn't have had to worry so much. I didn't tell her that I'd helped with that, either. I probably should have, but I was afraid she might get mad at me...

As for the sound system on the central stage that Dornell-senpai was having trouble with... That fix was also me. The root of the problem at the live show was the same as the trouble at the stadium: the issue was that the catalog data for the park's equipment was very old. The output of the amps on the stage was a little less than stated, and they couldn't get the numbers you'd expect from new speakers. There was an average of four speakers at each point around the stage, so if you shut off one speaker in each point, the problem went away.

Sorry. I'm getting a little technical. The point is, I just went to each location and unplugged one, and that had solved the problem. Whenever I notice trouble like that (and I don't have anything else to do), I like to walk around solving problems. I could have just told Dornell-senpai, "This is the problem!" but my lack of self-confidence held me back. That's why they're still having sound problems.

And as for Tricen-senpai's PV... The truth is, Tricen-senpai sometimes asks me for help and gives me access to the park's servers. You know, he says, "What do you think of this video? The password is

amaburi,” and things like that. I think he forgot we had that exchange (which is also a huge problem in its way...).

But thanks(?) to that, I was given a chance to view the (as yet unreleased) PV he had made. It really was pretty bad. And so, even knowing that it was against company rules, I made a few modifications. I salvaged the earlier video data that Tricen-senpai had saved, and edited it myself.

I knew it wasn't a good thing to do, but I also thought it was necessary. Of course, that meant I couldn't tell anyone. It was just another thing I pretended to know nothing about, and I feel really bad about it.

So with one thing and another, at some point, rumors about a “fairy” had started spreading around the park... After that, there was no turning back. I just had to hide it and try to ride it out. I'm sorry.

Despite my decision, I couldn't go to sleep right away that night. There was something else I had to do. I booted up the PC that I had just finished putting together this year. I didn't have a lot of money to spare, but I'd gotten a good Intel i7 (I used to be an AMD stan, but I eventually had to give up on it). I'd also splurged for a 16GB memory, and had two pretty expensive SSDs running in RAID 0. Thanks to that, it booted up very quickly. ...Well, not that I was running a complicated physics engine or anything; I was just connecting to the Internet.

First, I had to solve Dornell-senpai's problem. I looked up information on the sound system's manufacturer, and the company of the already-folded speaker maker. The Japanese site gave a 404, but there were quite a few of their foreign branches still around. Wow, Russian. I can't read that... I doubted even a translation site would help. But I spent about an hour and finally found the PDF I was looking for. This one was only in English. I'm not great with English, either, but with a little effort, I can read it.

I found some evidence of the same problem we were having happening overseas. It had apparently come to lawsuits that still hadn't been settled, and of course, both sides told very different stories. That meant I had no idea which was right. Political concerns were blocking me from finding the root of the problem, when what I wanted was a neutral specialist opinion. It was tricky.

Despite my doubts, though, I felt like I had gotten a general idea of how to solve the problem. I wrote down a brief explanation of the issue, hammered out some replacement code (it was just changing a part of it, so it just took me ten minutes), got myself a throwaway email address, and sent it to Dornell-senpai. I couldn't be bothered to think of a proper email address, so I just set it as “fairy0301” (the numbers represented the time of night it was). After everything that

happened, I had a feeling he'd know it was me, but I could probably make it through as long as I feigned ignorance.

I hesitated over whether or not to write "This should solve your sound problems," but it seemed like it would make it even more obvious it was me, so I decided not to. Oh, forget it. It was up to Dornell-senpai if he wanted to use it or not. Helping him out with this probably meant we would have to take part in the live show after all, though, so I could probably hold off on telling the others about the issue for a little while longer. As for Isuzu-san and Tricen-san's problems... well, I probably didn't have to do those tonight. I'd time it just right and figure out something within the week.

I sent the email. Then I went right to sleep. I was so tired, I even forgot to turn off my PC.

The next morning, I dragged my sleep-deprived self to work, where I found Muse and the others making a ruckus in the Elementario greenroom. "Good morning... Um, what's going on?" They didn't even notice me; I guess I'm just that invisible.

"Salute the fairy!" Sylphie shouted. She was standing at attention for some reason, her fingers snapped to her forehead like an American marine.

There was a model of a stylized fighter jet hanging in one of the greenroom's empty lockers. It looked like a science fiction-y spaceship with twin ramjet engines. *Ah, Battle Fairy, right? The Yukikaze. I remember ALTER sold them once upon a time... I hear they'll be putting out a robot called the Savage soon, too. Thank you very much! (Not sure why I'm thinking that.)*

A small cup of sake and a smoldering incense stick sat in front of the model, in the manner of a Buddhist altar. There were snack foods placed there, too, like little offerings of some kind.

"Salute complete!" Sylphie-san seemed to be the only one saluting seriously, but Muse-san and Salama-san were basically playing along. "Now, hands together! Heart Sutra! Recite!" She began the chant, then rapped on a wood block. She seemed to be the only one enthusiastic about reciting the sutra, but Muse-san and Salama-san patiently joined in. All I could tell was that it was a ritual of some sort, so I remained, cowed, in a corner of the room. After the recitation finished, Sylphie-san finished off with a prayer in Latin that I couldn't understand, then shouted, "Prayer complete! Let's give it our all again today!"

In response, the other two shouted:

"Yeah!"

"Fairy-san! Please continue to help the park!"

"Help the park!"

"Okay! Let's gooo!" Sylphie-san ran out of the greenroom, looking



very fired up. Muse-san and Salama-san both looked a little embarrassed.

“Um... what’s going on?” I asked.

“Oh, morning, Kobory,” Muse-san said, noticing me at last. Her smile was a little awkward. “It’s... a little hard to explain. It’s a little like a prayer before we go onstage... You know, like how Michael Jackson did it.”

“Ahh...” I said. Michael Jackson used to gather all his dancers together before they went on stage to pray; apparently, this was a similar ritual.

“And so, y’know... we figured we’d try praying to that mysterious fairy that’s been helping the park,” Salama-san added, while playing with her smartphone as usual.

“The fairy, huh?” I commented.

“Oh, Kobory, you have heard, haven’t you?” Muse-san asked. “There’s been this mysterious fairy... and we started wondering... what would happen if we prayed to it?”

“With a science-fiction fighter jet and the Heart Sutra?” I checked.

“Yeah. Sylphie arranged most of it. We were hoping the fairy might help out our attraction, too... you know?”

“I see. I think I understand.” I turned my eyes down and started trembling in a combination of shame and embarrassment.

Muse-san must have misinterpreted that reaction, because she quickly waved at me with both hands. “Um! I mean, obviously, you’re free to follow any religion here you like! You don’t have to go along with it if you don’t want to! Really! Just do whatever you like!”

“It’s not for freedom of religion reasons, but I still think I’ll pass,” I told them. Praying to myself would just be pathetic, and calling that ‘ritual’ a religion would be an insult to real believers.

“Ah, okay... Well, Sylphie will probably get tired of it eventually,” Muse told me. “Don’t worry too much, okay?”

“Nah, it’s definitely worrying,” Salama-san put in.

“Huh?” Muse protested. “But I had a lot of fun!”

“You’re the only one who did.”

“Was I?”

Muse-san and Salama-san left the greenroom, still verbally sparring.

Left on my own, I changed swiftly into my stage costume and checked myself out in the mirror. I think it’s kind of what people call “purity fetish”—it’s a cute, frilly costume of green and white, but it splits open in the front so you can see my panties, as well as my belly button and thighs. But I was used to it, enough that I no longer felt ashamed... I was a little shocked by my own adaptability in that regard. Fortunately, because I’d resisted the allure of snacks last night,

my stomach was nice and flat. I was proud of myself for working so hard... though I guess that's a bit shameless of me.

Then there was an in-building announcement to the attraction staff: "The first performance starts in ten minutes. Current attendance is 80%. All cast, please take your places."

I was in a panic. They would do a roll call at five minutes till, and if the main cast weren't all in place, the performance would be canceled.

I was about to run to my position, but then I stopped. That empty locker... treats had been left out for the mystery fairy. One of them was some Consomme Double Punch chips.

I looked around a few times. No one else was in the room. "....." I reached out, snagged one, and ate it. Just one—a single potato chip. But it was delicious, and the flavor filled me from head to toe.

After all, the offerings were meant for me, right? So what was wrong with me eating them? Sylphie-san had said it, too: "Fairy, please keep helping the park."

*Okay, I'll help. I'll do my best. I swear.*

The potato chip's flavor remained with me long after.

**[The End]**



# An Unusual Combination

Oh, hello. I'm the Spirit of Water, Muse.

When you work at an amusement park, Monday night is a bit like Saturday night. Tuesday typically has our lowest attendance rates, and it's when several attractions close for maintenance, so we don't have to do as many performances.

I sometimes wondered if the whole park couldn't just take a day off... but our (acting) manager Kanie-san refused to let it happen. "No days off! No matter what!" he barked at us during a meeting when it was brought up. "We need every single guest we can get! I'd run the place 24/7 if I could!"

Of course, we couldn't possibly be in business 24 hours a day, but... well, the renovations had helped in getting us a lot more customers than before. We'd already exceeded last year's attendance, so we'd assumed we were in the clear, but Kanie-san still seemed very stressed out about it. I sometimes wondered if there was something going on that he wasn't telling us. I'd tried asking his secretary Isuzu-san about it (we're pretty close, after all), but she didn't seem to want to talk about it, either.

Anyway, this all started one particular Monday night in September. We'd finished our final performance of the day, and I proposed doing our usual "Elementario girls hit the town!" outing. Unfortunately, it wasn't a good time for the other three.

Salama said, "Sorry, I have a lot of unpacking to do since the move..."

Kobory said, "I'm sorry, I have a lot of pages to draw for my hobby..."

Sylphie said, "I have a class in Tsukiji tonight..." Of all the excuses, "class in Tsukiji" seemed the most confusing, but I'd long since stopped letting myself be bothered about every little thing Sylphie said and did. She wasn't the kind of girl who'd just lie, so if she said she had a class in Tsukiji, she probably did.

At any rate, what it amounted to was that the others didn't have time to hang out. I was still free, though so... *hmm, what should I get up to?* I wondered. As I walked through the employee gate, I tossed around the idea of going straight home and brainstorming new performance ideas. But as I arrived at the bus stop...

"Oh, it's Muse, fumo," Moffle-senpai called out to me. He was a fluffy, plush fairy who served as the park's most popular mascot. But

because he was currently wearing his Lalapatch Charm, he would look like a normal person to mortal eyes.

“Done for the day, pii?” Wanipii-senpai said to me, as well. He was standing with Moffle-senpai, and also wearing a Lalapatch Charm. Wanipii-senpai was an alligator. He was a minor character in the park, but he did have some niche appeal. He often skipped out on work, too.

“Are you on your way home?” our head of finances, Ashe-san, asked in a kind voice. She had dark brown skin and blonde hair, and looked very smart in her glasses and business suit. She had a beautiful face and a dynamite body; she looked a little like a dark elf or a succubus. She normally had horns and pointed ears, but outside the park, she looked like an ordinary mortal.

“Ah, yes,” I told them all. “Are you all heading home?”

“Moffu. Actually, the three of us were talking about hitting up the yakitori bar, fumo.”

“Do you mean that ‘Savage’ place?” I checked.

“Yes, pii. Muse-chan, want to join us, pii?”

It was an unusual grouping. Moffle-senpai usually went out drinking with Tiramii-senpai and Macaron-senpai—I wouldn’t go so far as to call them “soul brothers,” but they really were close. Wanipii-senpai usually didn’t go to drinking parties at all; he almost always refused invitations, and kept a respectful distance from headliner mascots like Moffle-senpai. As for Ashe-san... I don’t know her well. She doesn’t usually visit the attractions, and I don’t see her otherwise except for during meetings or in passing in the general affairs building. I’ve always thought she was an amazing person, but we’ve never had a real conversation before.

Now, these three wanted me to join them at Savage, the yakitori bar? I wondered if it would be awkward, with them all being older than me... Wanipii-senpai aside (sorry), Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san were considered some of AmaBri’s most powerful people. As leader of Elementario, I couldn’t exactly decline.

Yes, it’s politics! It’s all about politics! I should put on my biggest smile and wheedle out some information to improve my attraction, right?! That would help us to solve the costume problem that’s been giving us so much trouble lately, right?! (Who would that benefit, you ask? Us, of course! I’m terrified of how accustomed to those costumes we’ve gotten! I mean, I’m totally fine with it now! And I’m not fine with the fact that I’m fine with it!)

The bus was pulling in to the stop, and I had to make a decision. “Sure thing! If I won’t be in the way, that is...” I said with a smile, while fighting butterflies in my stomach.

“All right then, fumo. Let’s get going!”

And so, we all got on the bus to Amagi Station.

“Moffu. Macaron had plans to see his daughter Lalapa, and Tiramii’s on another rendezvous with some MILF. I was feeling a little out in the cold, fumo,” Moffle-senpai told me as we strolled through the shopping district at night. “Now, I still didn’t have anything else to do tonight, so I thought I’d have a drink alone before heading home. But that’s when I ran into Ashe-san, fumo. She’s always staying past midnight because of the finances, see, so it’s rare I get to see her, fumo.”

“Yes,” Ashe-san affirmed. “I’d just sent some documents to Ikegami-sensei... so I had a little bit of free time.” Ikegami-sensei was the tax accountant for AmaBri; he was an attractive, middle-aged man who liked soccer. Apparently, a certain money-ignorant light novel writer has been giving him a lot of trouble lately. (I have no idea why I’m bringing that up.)

“So, given how rare it is to see her at all,” Moffle went on, “I asked Ashe-san to join me, fumo.”

“Ahh...” I said.

“A performer and an accountant. It might be one of your odder pairings, but I thought it would be a good chance to find some common ground, fumo. Right, Ashe-san?”

Ashe-san smiled awkwardly. “Well... I’m grateful for the sentiment, but surely we can refrain from talking about work tonight, Moffle-san?”

“Ah... that’s right. Sorry,” he said apologetically. “Anyway, that’s how it went down, fumo. I said, ‘Ashe-san, come join me for a drink for once.’”

“Yes. And Moffle-san is AmaBri’s breadwinner, after all...” I noticed a strange look in Ashe-san’s eyes as she said that. Was that... lust? As a fellow woman, I couldn’t miss it.

Oh! I don’t mean to say that Ashe-san was leering at Moffle-senpai or anything! It’s just... how to put it? There was that affection there, the kind you got from a fine specimen of womanhood watching a fine specimen of manhood. Interest, would you call it? Those weren’t the eyes of a woman placating some fussy old sexual harasser... even if he was a plush mouse. Did Ashe-san know about Moffle-senpai’s human form? I found myself strangely curious.

“Oh, come on...” Moffle-senpai said, slumping. He didn’t seem to notice Ashe-san’s interest at all, which made it all the more frustrating. “Then, well, once Ashe and I had decided we’d go out drinking, Wanipii showed up, fumo. So we had to invite him along, fumo.”

Wanipii-senpai’s umbrage was immediate. “How dare you, pii! I refused at first! Don’t make it sound like I was begging for it, pii!”

“Moffu,” Moffle said pointedly. “But if Ashe-san and I had just gone off into the city at night, you would’ve raised a stink. You remember the thing with Nyathan and Takami-chan recently, the way everyone talked about me? I’m not going through that again, fumo.”

“Well, it was suspicious, pii!” Waniipii-senpai protested. “I’m still not convinced that you didn’t take her home, pii!”

Takami-chan was a college student who worked part-time at Savage, the place we were going to now. AmaBri’s cast were regulars there, and Moffle-senpai had invited her out once after hours. They’d gotten drunk out in the city, and “indulged each other’s desires”... or so the rumors claimed. Moffle-san seemed too hard-nosed for that, so I had my doubts, but most people accepted it, insisting, “Moffle has his needs, too.”

Takami-chan was something of an idol among the AmaBri mascot cast, anyway, and while I can agree that she’s pretty and charming, I never understood why the men all put an unremarkable college student on such a pedestal, while ignoring the girls of AmaBri. (We have a lot of cute girls too!) Well, it is what it is. Maybe it’s hard to look at the girls you work with that way.

“Moffu. ...I’m telling you, I just walked her home and then left, fumo.”

“I doubt it, pii! In that case... in that case... I’ll ask Takami-chan myself, pii!”

“Hmm,” Moffle mused. “If you ask her that, she’ll really hate you, fumo.”

“What?! But why, pii?”

“You don’t know? You really don’t know, fumo? Wanipii, you have a real problem, fumo.”

It felt like a storm was rolling in. While I was fretting about how to smooth things over, Ashe-san just shrugged and smiled. I think she was telling me, “It’ll be fine; just leave them alone.”

At last, we arrived at the yakitori bar, Savage. It was a hole-in-the-wall restaurant founded in 1992, so it was over 20 years old now. The sliding glass door was sticky with oil, and a powerful smell of sauce wafted out from the exhaust fan. The minute we got through the door, I could feel the stickiness of the tiles beneath my shoes. I would never come here with the Elementario girls, but the food was very good. The negima, in particular, was excellent.

Takami-chan, the girl we’d been talking about, wasn’t present; she must have been off today. Instead, we were welcomed by a man I didn’t recognize, who was about the same age as her.

“Moffu. Is the back open, fumo?”

“Huh?” The man asked.

“The back, fumo,” Moffle repeated himself.

“Huh? Um...” He must have been new; he seemed completely baffled by a reference that Takami-chan would understand right away.

“The tatami room in the back, fumo,” Moffle tried again. “They let us use it a lot...”

“O-Oh... I’d have to ask...”

“Sorry, Moffle-san!” the head chef, who was cutting chicken in the kitchen, called out to Moffle, as if to put the conversation out of its misery. “It’s open. Go on in.”

“Moffu. Thanks, fumo.”

“Takami-chan has a cold today,” the head chef explained. “Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s awful, fumo,” Moffle-senpai said simply, then headed into the back. Wanipii-senpai looked a little disappointed.

Meanwhile, Ashe-san and I were carefully considering how we should interpret Moffle-senpai’s reaction. Did Moffle-senpai know about her cold or not? Knowing would give us a valuable clue. If he knew, then Moffle-senpai and Takami-chan were in exclusive contact, and it would mean they had interacted today. If he didn’t, then at the very least, they weren’t quite that close—not close enough for one to let the other know when one of them was sick, at least.

Incidentally, I had Takami-chan’s info on LINE and Twitter, too. She hadn’t reported that she had a cold; in other words, it wasn’t public information.

“Ashe-san... how would you interpret that?” I whispered.

“Hmm... I’m not sure,” she hissed back. “Lord Moffle is a performer, after all.”

“I feel like he knew,” I insisted. “He seemed a little too flippant, right?”

“That’s true,” she agreed. “But that’s how he usually acts, isn’t it? I could see him making a big deal if it were Latifah-sama, of course...”

“Hmm... That is true...” While we were whispering to each other, Moffle-senpai entered the tatami room in back and beckoned us to follow.

“Over here, fumo. Come on in.”

“R-Right!” I quickly jogged through the narrow corridor, feeling that the secretive exchange had made me feel a bit closer to Ashe-san. We’d thought the same thing in the same moment, and we’d managed to exchange opinions in very few words. It was a minor thing, I guess, but it had been very satisfying.

“All right! Let’s have a toast, fumo!” Moffle-senpai called out, and we clinked our mugs together. Moffle-senpai had Hoppy Black, Ashe-san and I had draft beers, and Wanipii-senpai had a grapefruit sour.

Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san nearly chugged down their entire mugs, then each let out a big, ecstatic sigh. Meanwhile, Wanipii-senpai seemed done after a single sip.



“Ah, delicious!” Moffle-senpai sighed, before calling out to the server. “Excuse me!”

“Yes?”

“Another draft beer and Hoppy, please!” said Ashe-san, who placed Moffle’s order without asking him first.

Moffle-senpai seemed delighted by the gesture. “Oh, thanks. You can hold your liquor, Ashe-san.”

“Oh, hardly,” she responded dismissively.

“Come on. I saw you drink Ironbeard under the table, fumo,” Moffle-senpai scoffed. “Even Tiramii is terrified of you, fumo.” Ironbeard was another member of the cast, a former pirate and elephant seal mascot who loved his booze.

“I see,” she said thoughtfully. “But... I’d say Ironbeard-san is just a reckless drinker.”

“Oh! You came out and said it, fumo!”

“Maybe he visits too many hostess clubs?” Ashe-san shrugged. “He really should just drink at a normal pace.”

“Still, if you were pouring for me, I’d have no choice but to chug, fumo.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“You’d be scary if I refused, fumo.”

“How mean!” Ashe-san pouted. “Why would you call me scary?”

Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san shared a laugh while I gritted my teeth in a smile. Wanipii-senpai remained silent with a vague smile on his face. What on earth was going on here?

Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san’s exchange had really rattled me. After all, the two had never seemed particularly close... As Moffle-senpai had said, Ashe-san was the head of the finance department, which meant she controlled the park’s budget. She held the purse strings in an iron grip, and her main job was to make sure the rest of us kept our spending responsible.

Meanwhile, Moffle-senpai was the leader of the performer cast; he had to be our advocate, begging for funding to finance what we needed. It was only natural, given their positions. Destiny had pitted them against each other. Now, after just one drink—before they were even drunk—they were already playfully needling each other. I have very little experience in the larger world, but even I could see what was going on there.

“You *are* scary, fumo. You’re especially scary when you go quiet,” Moffle-senpai opined. “Isuzu’s punishments can’t compare.”

“Oh? That’s your own faults, by the way,” Ashe-san pointed out. “You tease Isuzu-chan too much just because you think it’s cute.” She said, swiftly changing the subject.

*Great tactics, Ashe-san!* I thought with admiration.

“Moffu. Do we?”

“Yes, you do. It’s cruel.”

“Well, she just makes it too easy,” Moffle-senpai protested. “I’ve asked the others to tone it down.”

“But they don’t listen, do they?”

“Hmm, I see,” he grumbled. “I’ll think about it, fumo.”

“Please do. I mean it.” While they were talking, the new part-timer brought another mug of Hoppy and one of beer. “Speaking of Isuzu-chan,” Ashe-san said once the part-timer was gone again, “how are things going for her lately?”

“Going? Same as ever, fumo. You know her type. Secretarial work is a cinch for her. You’ve seen her, haven’t you?”

“I don’t mean that,” Ashe-san denied. “I mean with Kanie-san.”

“Oh. Ohh!” Moffle-senpai clapped his paws together as if catching her drift. “You mean *that*, fumo.”

“Yes, *that*.”

“Let’s see...” he said thoughtfully. “I guess I’d say no progress, fumo. There’s no sexual tension between the two at all, fumo.”

“I see. Well, that’s more or less what I’d assumed...” The two gulped down their mugs and laughed cheerfully. “Isuzu-chan is quite a late bloomer, isn’t she?”

“So is Seiya, fumo.”

“You think so?” Ashe-san asked.

“Of course, fumo! Isn’t it obvious? He’s stiff as a board! Total square. A real ‘gentleman.’ He’d never make a pass at a co-worker, fumo.”

Ashe-san tilted her head, a thin smile appearing on her face. “Oh? Are you sure?”

“Oh, please. Are you *not*?” Moffle-senpai scoffed.

“I can’t say that I am,” she said. “I think the real playboys keep their cards close to the chest...” Looking back, I don’t think Ashe-san’s argument probably was how she really felt; I think she was just playing Devil’s advocate to liven up the conversation.

Her response caused Moffle-senpai to fold his arms, harrumph, and hold off his response. It was a lengthy consideration, as if they were playing shogi. Wanipii-senpai turned his eyes downward and stayed silent. In the end, I was the one who took the bait.

“I d-don’t think Kanie-san is that sort of person!” I said, loudly enough that you could probably hear me outside the tatami room—maybe even outside the bar itself.

“Ohh?” Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san said at once. They both looked extremely interested.

“What makes you say that, fumo?”

“Why don’t you tell ‘big sister’ a little more about it?”

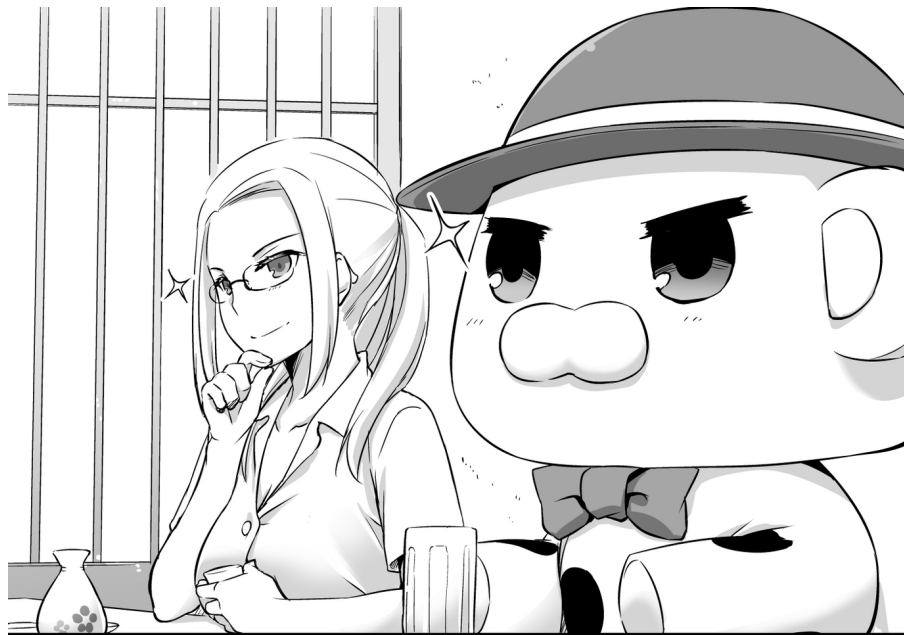
There was a sadistic gleam in both of their eyes. I could immediately tell that I'd stepped on a land mine.

"Huh?" I fumbled. "Um, um..."

"I'm curious, fumo..."

"I'm curious, too..."

I finally understood: They hadn't really been arguing at all. They'd just been doing a little double act for me and Wanipii-senpai! It hadn't started that way... but in the process they'd achieved a tacit understanding and brought things around in that direction. They knew they'd end up in a fight if they talked about work, so they thought they might as well have a little fun!



“Moffu. I’m very curious, fumo. Tell us all why you think Seiya isn’t that way.”

“U-Um...”

“Don’t worry. We’re all drinking here,” Ashe-san said reassuringly. “Why don’t you just let it all out? Come on, now. First, take a big drink. Biiiiig drink.” Ashe-san gently nudged my beer toward me. I finished it off, and found a second beer sitting in front of me immediately. “You don’t have to drink it if it’s too much, all right?”

“Yeah. No need to force yourself, fumo. Now, back to the earlier question. ...Why do you think Seiya’s a straight-shooter with women? I want to hear evidence, fumo.”

“Huh?! Well... well...” Nothing was coming to me. Something, something... I found my hands going straight for the mug. I took a few deep gulps to try to buy time.

“Blugh...” In the ten seconds or so it earned me, I was hoping the subject would be changed, but no such luck. Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san were extremely patient, and they were waiting for my response.

“So?” they both said in unison. It seemed there was no more avoiding it.

“Well... Kanie-san is...”

“Yes, yes?”

“Kanie-san is... not very calculating...” I tried, “when it comes to his personal relationships...”

“Fumo, fumo.”

*Oh, forget it*, I decided, and just lay it all out there. “Well, you know? He’s so arrogant and domineering, right? He really annoys me, too, if I’m honest. But... someone who’s actually trying to get something will usually throw some ingratiating and coaxing into their act. But he doesn’t, you know? He’s just arrogant start to finish, and I think maybe that’s evidence that he’s actually very forthright! And that’s also why I’ve decided to stick with him!”

After I’d finished speaking my piece, Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san both looked up at the ceiling and said “Ahh” in one voice.

“What kind of reaction is that?” I demanded to know.

“Oh, um. You know, fumo. I know people don’t use the term ‘louse’ to refer to men much nowadays, but that’s the kind of line you tend to hear from a woman refusing to break up with her louse of a boyfriend.”

“What?” I asked.

“I hear that. You know... ‘His selfishness is just a sign of honesty!’ and such... You see it a lot with girls who think of themselves as the lead in a romance movie,” Ashe-san put in.

“Huh? Huh?!” Why were they turning on me for trying to say something positive?! I felt so confused.

“Moffu. You know the extreme version of that? ‘It’s true that he hits me, but it’s not what you think! He never goes for the face!’ and such.”

“Ah, so true. I knew some girls like that back in school,” Ashe-san reminisced. “Very superficial. It seemed like it kept up for years and years...”

“Wow, really, fumo?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I graduated from a women’s college. I saw quite a lot of it.”

“Ah,” Moffle put in. “Did you, fumo? I do hear about those girls being superficial.”

“Yes. Only a small portion, but comparatively, a lot.”

“Which is it, fumo?”

The two of them burst out into cackles.

“Well... you know,” Ashe-san continued. “Statistics are an interesting thing. It’s like how they say most people with Priuses are bad drivers.”

“Moffu,” said Moffle, before waiting for her to continue.

“In fact, it’s just that there are so many on the market that you notice the bad drivers more. It’s sort of like that, I think.”

“That’s not helping your case, fumo!”

“What?” Ashe-san asked, looking perplexed.

“Because there aren’t that many women’s colleges!” Moffle pointed out.

“Well, true enough!”

They burst out into cackles again.

I wasn’t laughing one bit. Meanwhile, Wanipii-senpai was just playing around on his smartphone with an amiable smile. It looked like some kind of social game. *Come on, put it down and help me!* I begged.

“Well, anyway, fumo. Muse,” said Moffle, looking my direction. “Being superficial can hurt you in life, okay?”

“W-Wait a minute,” I objected strenuously. “When did you decide I was superficial?!”

“Are we wrong, fumo?”

“What? Well... ah...”

“See, you hesitated. You hesitated, fumo!” he pointed out triumphantly.

I groaned.

“Moffle-san, don’t tease her like that!” Ashe-san scolded.

“I’m not teasing her, fumo!”

The two burst out in cackles yet again. I was starting to feel like I wanted to kill someone.

“Ah, we’re sorry,” Ashe-san told me. “We’re really not trying to be

mean.”

“O-Okay...” I agreed shakily.

“I understand why you’d be attracted to someone like Kanie-san.”

“Well, well! There’s a dynamite admission, fumo.”

“I mean it, though. He’s very handsome. If I were in high school, I’d probably be falling all over him!” Ashe-san skillfully laughed off Moffle-san’s implication. Magnificent. Incredible. I took note of her technique and filed it away in the back of my mind. I’d love to say a line like that, some day.

*No, wait a minute!* I told myself. *Focus! I can’t let the conversation keep going this way! They’re making it sound like I’m in love with Kanie-san! I need to voice an objection!* “But, but um, I don’t... he’s my boss, I mean... That’s the only way I meant it.”

“Of course, of course. That’s what we’ll tell everyone.” Ashe-san patted my shoulder, smiling brightly. “Still... you should try to be less superficial. It won’t do you any favors in life.”

“R-Really?” I asked weakly.

“Really. For instance...” Ashe-san patted Moffle-san on the back.

“Moffu?”

“Let’s take this plush rodent fellow, here,” she suggested. “He’s strapping, isn’t he? He’s a former general, isn’t he? He’s amazing, isn’t he? He may frequently do stupid things, but he’s also frequently intelligent. You need to be able to see that in people.”

“What in the world? You make it sound like I’m not handsome, fumo.”

“You’re *not* handsome,” Ashe-san agreed amiably.

“Moffu,” Moffle huffed. “Well, maybe not.”

“But I still think you’re amazing, Moffle-san.”

“You do? I’m surprised, fumo.”

“You’re magnificent,” Ashe-san said soothingly, “truly.”

Another shockwave hit me. There was a genuine subtext behind their exchange. Sitting side by side, joking, there was a bit—just a bit of eroticism in the way Ashe-san gazed at Moffle. Of course, it wasn’t exactly yearning. But! How to put it... It did feel a little bit like “You’re on my radar!”

Oh, Goddess Libra! As far as I knew, Ashe-san doesn’t know about Moffle-senpai’s human form—that bearded, Aragorn-looking dreamboat. The only people who had seen that picture were me, the Elementario trio and Isuzu-san. Ashe-san was acting that way because she had an eye for people’s personalities that went above and beyond how physically attractive he might be. I had to say I was really impressed. (Although physical appearances aside, I still find Moffle-san a little harsh!) I was on pins and needles waiting to see how he would react.

“...Hmm, I can’t say as I know what to do with that. Cast leader and financial manager... forbidden love, fumo.” He went right for it! His plush paw even took Ashe-san’s hand. “If... If we tried it, Ashe, would you...”

“Yes?” she said.

“Would you approve the budget request I submitted last week?” Moffle asked earnestly.

“Absolutely not,” Ashe-san immediately denied.

“Thought not!”

They immediately cackled, clinked their glasses together, drank the rest down, then shouted “One more Hoppy and one more beer!” in unison.

I was about to die from exhaustion. What a battle of nerves! Were they joking around? Were they fighting? I had no idea. *If this is how adults do things, I never want to grow up!*

While I sat there, sweating, Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san continued to exchange cheerful(?) banter. In a complete change of subject, they moved on to pro baseball. Surprisingly, Moffle-senpai was a fan of the Giants. But he was the annoying kind of Giants fan who had a lot of internal conflict as a baseball fan, and had to contort himself into all kinds of knots to get over it. Meanwhile, Ashe-san was a fan of Hiroshima. She was an old-school fan who’d been very resentful of the recent “Carp Girls” phenomenon, but by now she’d gotten over it and remained a Hiroshima fan on the basis that the team’s growing popularity was helping them. It was so annoying!

When they asked me what team I liked, I answered, “the Red Sox,” and got ignored; apparently, MLB wasn’t allowed. I should have read the table better. Sorry!

Incidentally, when they asked the question of Wanipii-senpai, he just shut them down with, “I don’t watch baseball, pii.”

“You never change, Wanipii,” Moffle-senpai sighed.

“What does that mean, pii?”

“You know... Just name any ball club, even as a joke,” Moffle told him. “Like the Nankai Hawks.” I couldn’t tell how that was a joke, though I’d heard a ball club with that name had existed a long time ago.

“But I really don’t know anything about baseball teams, pii!” Wanipii-senpai protested. “I could name every past and present Morning Musume member if you want me to, though.”

“R-Really, fumo?”

“Easily, pii. Want me to try, pii? I’ll go alphabetically...”

“No, that’s not necessary.” Ashe-san cut him off swiftly. Wanipii-senpai looked sad about that.

“But idol groups... that’s an unknown frontier for us, isn’t it,



fumo?" Moffle said thoughtfully. "We just kind of threw Task Force ABC together, of course. What do you think of them, Wanipii?" Moffle-senpai may have been trying to be considerate, as Wanipii-senpai had been almost completely silent since they'd first arrived at Savage. Maybe he was feeling bad about that and was changing the subject to Wanipii-senpai's specialty.

Incidentally, Task Force ABC was a local idol unit produced by AmaBri. It was made of Adachi Eiko-san, Bando Biino-san, and Chujo Shiina-san—three mortal part-time workers. You could say they were like rivals to Elementario, but I was the only one who seemed to notice the threat they posed. Salama, Kobory, and Sylphie would all just watch their PVs and say things like, "Wow, so cute!" Didn't they realize that they could steal our theater?! I mean, they really are cute, okay? I just wish someone would acknowledge that they're our rivals! That's all. Excuse me. Anyway, back to the question to Wanipii-senpai.

When Moffle-senpai asked him about idol groups, Wanipii-senpai immediately took on the air of the expert, let his shoulders relax with a sigh, and said, "Well... they're not bad, pii."

"Hmm?" said Moffle.

"But that by itself won't get them out of the 'local idols' realm," Wanipii-sensei pointed out. "They lack passion, pii. It feels like a local club's side project, you know?"

"Hmm... I suppose that's true," Moffle admitted. "But don't people like that these days, fumo?"

"It's not that simple, pii," Wanipii sighed. "Back in the day, you know? A girl born with good looks could go to an audition and say 'My friends forced me into this; I didn't want to come,' pii. But things are different now, pii. There's been improvements in diet and plastic surgery... well, I'll assume they don't have surgery, but all the girls are a lot prettier now, pii. The industry's gotten more refined, pii. It's become harder to break out of the pack, pii. So if you're the kind of girl who's 'pretty enough, but you might have two or three like her in class,' the best way to get people rooting for you is to be seen working extra hard, pii."

"Oh-ho... I can see that, fumo."

"In other words, they need passion, pii. They need to work hard and care deeply about the people who support them if they want to pick up fans, pii. Task Force ABC lacks that, pii."

"Hmm..." Moffle mused.

"That's not to say they don't each have things going for them, pii. Eiko-chan is sexy, which is rare to see combined with a rich girl background these days, pii. Biino-chan's positivity is great, pii. And... Shiina-chan's singing voice is amazing, pii. ...But they need more than that to compete, pii. They don't realize what they bring to the table,

pii. They seem skeptical about their fans, too,” Wanipii critiqued, “which suggests that they don’t think highly of themselves. Of course, it’s really difficult for adolescent girls to strike a good balance between confidence and arrogance, but a slight lean towards arrogance is preferable, pii. In other words, unless those girls really get serious, they’re never gonna break out any further, pii.

“...Of course, breaking out brings its own challenges,” he continued. “It’s a harsh world out there, pii. The Internet’s not like it used to be, either; people can send you cruel comments directly, pii. They may have to do a lot of work they don’t really want to do... So staying as a loose local unit like they are now, then dispersing some time next year or so... might really be the best choice for them. They’ll make some lovely memories, and in 20 years or so, they can show pictures from this time to their children, and say, ‘That’s mommy right there!’ It’s not a bad thought, is it, pii? It’s a safe compromise that doesn’t hurt anybody.”

I’d never seen Wanipii-senpai speak so lucidly about anything. Plus, everything he was saying sounded really smart. I’d actually gained some respect for him.

“Of course, that’s just my own analysis,” he finished. “Others might feel differently.”

“Hmm... but it’s a very fine analysis,” Ashe-san said.

“I’m impressed too, fumo,” Moffle-senpai agreed.

“Ehehe... really, pii?”

“Well, let’s set this talk of idols aside, and go back to the earlier subject, fumo.”

“P-Pii?!” I had to agree that their treatment was cruel. Why not give him a few more moments in the sun?

Moffle-senpai just ignored Wanipii-senpai’s shocked stare, and cleared his throat. “Well, if we let you talk any more, you’ll go on forever, fumo. Besides, it’s similar to work talk,” he said dismissively. “Enough!”

“So cruel, pii...” Wanipii-senpai slumped over.

“What was the earlier subject, again? Girls who start dating after attending women’s colleges?” Ashe said, dragging up the topic everyone had more or less forgotten.

“Not that, fumo. ...Well, that was interesting in its own right,” Moffle admitted. “But we were talking about Seiya, fumo.”

“Ahh. Kanie-san, right,” Ashe-san agreed. “Speaking of which, Moffle-san, you seem very concerned with Kanie-san. Do you love him now?”

“Why would you say that, fumo?” Moffle asked in shock. “Who are you, Kobory?”

“I don’t mean it that way,” Ashe-san protested.

He struck the implication right down. I knew I couldn't tell Kobory about this; it would shatter her. That thought reminded me of the fact that Ashe-san's voice and Kobory's sounded very similar. (Not that it matters. Please forget I said it.)

"It's just, Moffle-san, you seem to praise Kanie-san a lot more than you used to," Ashe-san pointed out.

"Do I, fumo? I didn't even realize."

"Oh, I know what this is," she said brightly. "It's a 'He reminds me of myself when I was younger' thing. You know, typical elder narcissism!"

"Hey! Don't be ridiculous! I'm not that shameless!"

"Oh?" Ashe-san asked innocently.

"I mean it! It's not like that, fumo! I went to an all-boys school, and I was very popular there! I'm much, much better with people than that fool!"

"I don't see how that's relevant."

"You don't, do you?" Moffle muttered. "Anyway, we were talking about Seiya's relationships with women, fumo."

"Oh, that part..." Ashe-san said listlessly.

"Come on, Ashe. You knew what I meant, fumo! You knew it and teased me anyway, fumo!"

"Yes," she agreed, "you are correct."

"You're a terrifying woman, fumo!"

"Setting all that aside... We're talking about Kanie-san's relationships with women, right?"

"What's with that businesslike tone?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, we've just gotten derailed so many times," Ashe-san pointed out. "Let's get back to the main point."

"Moffu..." Moffle-senpai cleared his throat again. "So, Muse. Are you Team Latifah or Team Isuzu, fumo?"

"What?" The abruptness of the question caused my mind to go blank. "Um... um... I don't know what you..."

"Oh, come on!" Ashe-san said, striking the table with her mug. Wanipii-senpai and I both started to tremble at the gesture. "What other woman could Kanie-san possibly end up with besides Latifah-sama or Isuzu-chan?"

"Er... ah... of course... right?" I agreed cautiously, but at the same time, I wondered, *Is that... true?*

"So Mu-chan, what's your perspective?! That's what we're asking you! Get it?"

"Ah, right..." I realized Ashe-san had given up on mugs of beer, and had moved to Japanese sake. She seemed to be moving awfully quickly, today. And where did 'Mu-chan' come from? I hadn't been called that since kindergarten!

“So, which is it?” she demanded to know.

“Er... well...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Which?”

I was really at a loss. Isuzu-san was a beautiful woman. She had a great body, and she was from Maple Land nobility, and she had graduated from officer’s school early to join the royal guard. She was a true “super elite.” She could have any famous, moneyed noble she wanted (although she didn’t seem to want one...).

As for Latifah-sama, there wasn’t much to say. She was the princess of Maple Land, and first in line for the throne. She was also exceedingly gorgeous, and charming, at that. If you looked up the word “doll” in a dictionary, you’d almost certainly see a picture of her. She was frail and delicate, and so naive that I sometimes worried about her, yet she was kind and generous, as well.

It was impossible to compare the two. “They’re both amazing women...” I said, and then fell silent. That was right. It really would take someone in Latifah-sama or Isuzu-san’s league to catch Kanie-san’s eye. When I’d seen Kanie-san and Isuzu-san yelling at each other about work up close... When I’d seen Kanie-san and Latifah-sama enjoying their tea in the rooftop garden from afar... I always thought, *I’m so stupid. This is pathetic.*

He may be arrogant, but Kanie-san was always earnest in his thinking about the future of the park, and I really was attracted to him. I had been since the first moment we met. I just thought... he’s very handsome. It wasn’t like I was head-over-heels or anything; really, I think of it as being more like a crush. But I’m just so unimpressive.

When I was little, I wanted to be a ballerina, and I took classes for it. I wasn’t the most athletic person, but I felt like my sheer effort kept me in the running. The classes I took were for serious learners, and it was during summer vacation in my third year of middle school that my teacher broke it to me, “I don’t think you have what it takes.” Still, I liked dancing, and I never gave up.

I’m a Spirit of Water. My family are lords of a lake in the mortal realm (I don’t want to make any trouble for them, so I’ll just say they’re lords of a “Lake K” in a certain prefecture), and my parents wanted me to help with the family business. But I really wanted to pursue dancing, so I decided to give it a go in the mortal realm.

Before I came to AmaBri, I worked the night shift at a family restaurant while serving as a background dancer at a provincial amusement park. I basically lucked into being a featured dancer at AmaBri. An ordinary, provincial spirit like me... Kanie-san would never give someone like me the time of day. I don’t even have any romantic experience! I went to an all-girls school! It’s just like Moffle-

senpai and Ashe-san said! I'm superficial! I fantasize! Is that wrong? Is that wrong?! Yes, it's definitely wrong.

Well... I had reached the age when I should be able to recognize these problems in myself. And I'm not actually as superficial as she said... But anyway, you know? For someone like me, pursuing Kanie-san would be like someone who only ever played a game on "Casual" or "Very Easy" going right to "Nightmare" or "Hell Mode." I'd die in the first thirty seconds. So I'd decided I would just admire him from afar. I'd be happy just keeping my distance, occasionally sighing and whispering, "so wonderful"... That was all I needed.

And yet... It was a cruel thing for Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san to ask me.

"I think... they're both... wonderful people..." I said hesitantly. That took everything I had. This wasn't good. The world around me was growing fuzzy. The rim of the plate of snacks in front of me was starting to blur. The tip of my nose felt hot, and I was forced to sniffle.

"M-Moffu... Ah, er..." Moffle said, hesitantly. "You know, Muse? We just wanted to hear the opinion of someone in his general age group! Right, Ashe?!"

"Huh? ...Ah, yes! Th-That's right, of course!" she agreed hastily. "There's no ulterior motive. None at all! We were just curious... that's all."

"Right. Ah... I really am fine..." I told them.

As I wiped at my nose, Moffle-senpai pulled his wallet out from somewhere and thrust a thousand yen bill at Wanipii-senpai.

"Wanipii. Could you buy me some cigarettes, fumo?"

"Where did that come from?!" Wanipii asked indignantly. "Are you trying to get rid of me, pii?!"

"W-Well..." Moffle-senpai stuttered.

Meanwhile, Ashe-san spoke up. "Frankly, yes."

"P-Pii?!" Wanipii squeaked in outrage.

"Go buy them," she ordered him bluntly. "Leave the shop and head right. You'll find a convenience store. Read a whole manga magazine or a tankoban before you come back. Now, go on."

"Pii!!" Tears streaming from his eyes, Wanipii-senpai left. His willingness to play along suggested a certain generosity of spirit.

As Wanipii-senpai left the tatami room, Moffle-senpai bowed his head to me. "Er, I'm sorry, fumo. I didn't realize you were that serious about him, fumo."

"Wh-What do you mean?" I played dumb, even knowing it was foolish.

"Seiya, fumo. I'd assumed you just had a crush, fumo."

"Same here. We took our teasing too far. I'm sorry," Ashe-san apologized.

Moffle-senpai and Ashe-san both bowed deeply to me, and I started to feel like I was the one who had done something wrong. ...Although I was also a little bit annoyed at how easily they had figured out my feelings based on that one little display.

“Well... don’t get the wrong idea,” I said, wiping at the corners of my eyes. “It’s just that I’m very close to Isuzu-san, and I felt a little sorry for her when I heard you talking about her like that.” It was a big lie, but one that I worked very hard to tell.

“I-Is that so, fumo?”

“Yes. You all just keep gossiping about it for fun...” I said accusingly. “I feel bad for her. Latifah-sama, too. I wish you’d show them a little more consideration.”

“Moffu... I see. I’m sorry, fumo.” Moffle-senpai deflated, his shoulders sagging. It didn’t look like an act; Moffle-senpai always got mushy when Latifah was brought up.

Ashe-san, though... “I see, Muse. You’re right,” she said, entirely neutrally.

*What’s going on with her?* I wondered suspiciously. *Her reaction isn’t as simple as Moffle-senpai’s...*

“We can stop talking about it. Instead...”

“Instead?”

“Let’s hear some insider talk about Elementario,” she suggested. “How are things really going with you guys? Any funny stories?!”

“Huh?” I was caught off-guard.

“It annoys me how close you guys are!” Ashe-san said brightly. “Like you’re some middle school club! Isn’t there anything sordid going on? Forget Kanie-kun! Any sordid, petty complaints you have... like about who has the most fans?!”

“Um?” I blinked, unsure of what to say.

“Come on, talk!” she demanded. “Is there anyone you hate? How about Salama? I heard you wouldn’t let her stay with you after her place burned down!”

“Th-That was just—” I tried to defend myself.

“Do you not get along? That’s what I want to know! Tell ‘big sister’ all about it! I want all the dirt!”

“A-Ashe...” Moffle-senpai hesitantly patted her shoulder.

Ashe-san’s eyes were glazed over. She upended her cup of sake, and then let out a powerful sigh. “So? Tell me.”

“I don’t think there’s anything to tell...” I trailed off hesitantly. “We really do get along, more or less...”

“Liar, liar, liar!” Ashe-san insisted. “When I was your age, it was really hard! People called me a prodigy, and a genius. Everyone was jealous of me. I never got a break! Even if I worked hard! It was awful!” She let out a long, agonized breath. She was clearly very

drunk.

“Ashe,” Moffle said urgently. “Leave it—”

“Shut up, sewer rat!” she scoffed.

“What?!” Moffle-senpai was shocked by her words.

I was reminded that Ashe-san was the former minister of finance of the magical realm of Schubert. She was a true elite herself, and had probably been through hardships I couldn’t even imagine.

“I had to fight my way up the ladder,” she railed. “It was a dog-eat-dog world. I got sick of it. That’s... that’s why I quit. And here in AmaBri. Oh, AmaBri... hehehe... AmaBri? Yes, it’s great here. But still... Mu-chan.”

“Ah?” I asked, while thinking, *Mu-chan again, huh?*

“When I look at you guys, I get so jealous,” Ashe-san sulked.

“Because you get along so well, you know? I would be lucky to have had friends like that at your age...”

“Y-Yes,” I tried agreeing. “I understand.”

“No you don’t, stupid.”

*Me, stupid?! Sorry, but that’s a shock!*

“So... treasure them, okay?” Ashe-san ordered me sternly.

“Salama-chan and Kobory-chan and Sylphie-chan. Because they’re all good girls.”

“Okay,” I said.

“They’re good girls! You hear me?!”

“Y-Yes...”

“No, I really don’t think you do!” Ashe-san continued drunkenly.

“Because you’re always spending all my money on nothing, no concern for the park’s financial situation, always, always, always...”

“Ah! Okay, I think that’s enough, fumo!” Moffle-senpai declared loudly.

“Huh? Already?”

“Already, fumo. Let’s head home! I’ll pay!” Moffle-senpai nudged Ashe-san’s shoulder.

Ashe-san crumpled; she looked half-conscious. “Fine, sorry... That isn’t how I meant it...”

“So can we bill this to the park, fumo?” Moffle suggested slyly.

“No.” That was one thing she remained firm on, at least.

“Then let’s go, fumo. Come on, on your feet.”

“Mmgh...” she groaned.

“Darn it... Ashe,” Moffle grumbled, “I thought you were stronger than that.”

“Mm. I’m tired today.”

“Well, you finished your work, and you’re probably sleep-deprived...” he mused.

“You’re so understanding.”

"And I should have paid more attention, fumo."

"Then, Moffle-san..." Ashe-san sighed, "you'll get me home?"

"Ah? Ah... sure, fumo. Come on, now. Stand up."

"Darn it..." she complained.

"Excuse me, fumo! The check, please!"

The part-time worker came and brought us the check. Wanipii-senpai still wasn't back from buying cigarettes.

Apparently, it was rare to see Ashe-san get this drunk; she'd talked a big game at first, then immediately became gloomy and depressive.

"Sorry, Muse..." she told me sadly.

"No, it's fine," I reassured her. "It's really fine."

"I'm just really tired. Forgive me?"

"Um, it's really fine..."

"We're still friends?"

"Of course!" I insisted. "It really is fine!" I was most surprised to hear her call herself my friend at all; I was honored.

"Moffu. Anyway, see you, Muse," Moffle-senpai said, helping the slouching Ashe-san up. "I'll take Ashe home. You wait for Wanipii, all right?"

"Huh?!" I said.

"I sent him a message earlier, but he hasn't replied, fumo. At least tell him we all went home."

"But..."

"Thanks, fumo. See you," Moffle-senpai told me, and then left the room with Ashe-san. She was shaky on her feet and leaning on him. They walked off with a quiet exchange of, "I'm so embarrassed... don't tell anyone," and "Okay, fumo," and "Was it like this with Takami-chan?" and "How much have you heard, fumo?"

*What is with that sexual tension?* I thought. With the way Ashe-san was acting, I wondered if things were going to go places between them later. In fact, he would probably just take her home, put her to bed, and that would be the end of it. But watching them go, I felt like I was seeing something very adult.

At the same time, my own head was spinning; I was exhausted. The thought of walking seemed like too much effort, and my stomach felt like it was full of lead—something about that Savage room made people drink too much. I'd been through the emotional wringer, too. Honestly, I was probably about as dizzy as Ashe-san was.

"Muse-chan?" I looked back and saw Wanipii-senpai standing there.

"Sorry, pii," he apologized. "They told me to read one manga magazine, but there were a whole lot of new ones on sale today, so I ended up reading three, pii." It was impressive, in a way.

"Oh, Wanipii-senpai. The truth is..." I explained that Moffle-senpai



and Ashe-san had gone home.

Wanipii-senpai seemed to understand, and just said, “Oh, okay, pii. But Muse-chan,” he added, “you’re looking pretty bad, too.”

“Oh, well...” I trailed off.

“I’ll get you to a taxi at Amagi Station; no ulterior motives,” Wanipii promised. “Can you get back on your own after that? I promise I’ll see you off!”

“Th-Thanks...” I mumbled. Wanipii-senpai was a good person. I felt bad for being so guarded around him.

I was squatting next to a power pole when Wanipii helped me stand up, swaying and uncertain on my legs. With his help, I just barely managed not to fall.

“You okay, Muse-chan?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m sorry...” Just then, I heard a voice from nearby. A familiar voice.

“Nya, nya!” was the first sound I heard. I looked up and saw Nyathan-san standing at the corner nearby. He must have been on his way home after drinking in the neighborhood.



Colonel Nyathan. He worked in one of AmaBri's five areas, Etceteland. He was a communist cat from the UPSR, where he apparently held the rank of Colonel.

Colonel Nyathan shivered and trembled. "W-Wanipii..." Colonel Nyathan said.

"Pii?"

"You... you were the one person I believed in," he cried. "I'm so disillusioned, nya."

"Nyathan. What are you talking about, pii?"

"You... you capitalist!!" Colonel Nyathan screamed. "To get an Elementario girl drunk, and take her back home with you! I'm disappointed, nya! I'm so disappointed, nya!"

"Wait, pii!" Wanipii protested. "It's a misunderstanding, pii!"

"No! You're just like Moffle!" Colonel Nyathan howled. "Die! Suffer and die!"

"Wait!"

"I never want to see you again, nya!" Colonel Nyathan ran off, crying. I was feeling very unsteady on my feet, so I just slumped limply in place, not saying anything.



Apparently, this was the exact same way that the rumors between Moffle-senpai and Takami-chan got started. Nyathan-san was the source. I'd enjoyed the rumors then, but I couldn't now.

But... I wonder why? They all seemed okay with the pairing of me and Wanipii-senpai. I didn't know how to feel about that. Did other people think that Wanipii-senpai and I could really be dating?! It was a real shock! I virulently denied it. I *thoroughly* denied it. I denied it so hard I probably made Wanipii-senpai feel bad (sorry).

I had a few chances since then to see Wanipii-senpai in the cafeteria or the underground corridors. I'd say "Sorry" and he'd smile self-effacingly to make me feel better and say, "it's okay, pii."

At times like that, I found myself thinking, "Huh? Maybe he really is a pretty good person..." No! Forget about that. But I was thinking a little bit. If even an amazing woman like Ashe-san could be that way... Then maybe even an awful person like me...

No. Never mind that. I'm not quite *that* stupid. Isuzu-san or Latifah-sama? Like I'd know the answer to that!

**[The End]**

# Sylphie Channel! Exciting Reviews

Hi, everyone! It's me, the Spirit of Wind, Sylphie! Thanks for always supporting me and Elementario! Where do you like to shop on your days off and stuff? I go to Sugamo!

But lately, I'm so busy with work, I can't go shopping at all! That's why Internet shopping is super cool! I love dodonbashi.com! And of course I'm a regular patron of Nyamazon!

Now I'm gonna introduce a magic item I just bought on the 'net! I bought it with my own money, so no holding back! Mr. Maker, hold on to your butt! Today I'm gonna introduce Fumokilla Chemicals' "Palpon Next Super Jet!"

Look! It looks like insecticide or hairspray, right? Check out that funky psychedelic logo! If you hit something with this spray, it has the same effect as eating those magical flowers, the palpons! You know palpon flowers, right? They look like little sunflowers, but they have sunglasses, and they wriggle their bodies all around and do a funky dance! If you eat them, you feel awesome! It makes you the most excitedest! I hear they mainly grow in the Tiradaho region of Maple Land! Tiramii-senpai, the Fairy of Flowers, has done a lot of selective breeding with palpons, I hear!

The Palpon NEXT Super Jet is a magical item that gives you the same effect in handy-dandy spray form! Awesome! The ingredients say "Pyrethroids (futarusurin, resmethrin), kerosine" but who cares! I bet it's great for killing bugs, too! With mosquito season coming up, it's a bargain!

Okay, I guess I'd better use it, huh? Women gotta be brave! I'll try it as many times as I need! Point it right at my face, and bloosh!

It hurts! It hurts! It stings! It stings like tonic shampoo! It's seeping into my organs!

So, let's see what it does! ...Any effect?! I'll measure the time in my favorite hourglass! Let's dance around and wait excitedly for three, six, and nine minutes!

.....

.....

.....No change at all! I'm not excited! I'm the same Sylphie I was! Too bad!

I bet this Palpon NEXT Super Jet is a big old case of false advertising! Because I'm totally like usual, see? I'm as excited as ever, see? Too bad!

But that's not much of a review, so let's test it on other people! It's the only way to be fair! By the way, I'm writing this review from the greenroom as always! And just at the perfect time, a person who's always a big sourpuss has arrived—it's Salama-san, the Spirit of Fire!

"Salama, Salama!" I cried out excitedly.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Blooooosh!"

"Geh?!" she cringed.

I did it! I sprayed Salama! I sprayed it on hard! Wowie! I got a perfect result! Salama-san was really high-strung as she got mad, and then she cried, and then she started dancing!

I felt bad and said, "Sorry!"

She just said, "Don't worry! Don't worry! Wow! Get up-pah!" And I got so happy I started dancing with her! It was so fun! We're good friends! We held hands and spun and spun until Muse and Kobory entered the greenroom, too!

"Wh-What are you doing?" Muse asked.

"A-Are you guys all right?!" Kobory put in.

And now I knew it worked, so I sprayed them both with the Palpon NEXT Super Jet too! I said, "Bwahaha, you can't escape," and I sprayed them! It's a 'super jet' after all! For purposes of review, I'd say it's effective, even from three meters away! Perfect!

Muse and Kobory got all excited, too! We all held hands and danced around and around! Then we did a Cossack dance, and a Bali chaka, and a Masai war dance! We're such good friends! It was so fun!

But I think we made too much noise! Moffle-senpai, who had come to discuss the show on the main stage, got so mad at us! "Wh-What are you doing, fumo?!" he said. But don't worry, I sprayed Moffle-senpai, too! I was all blooooosh!

"Guh!" he cried out. I sprayed him in the face! Sprayface! "Wow! I feel great, fumo! Dadada!" Moffle-senpai also joined in with a very complicated dance!

Wow! Wow! Now Moffle-senpai joined in, and all five of us did a Mayim Mayim! Mayim mayim mayim mayim mayim mayim b'sason! You know?

Then Macaron-senpai and Tiramii-senpai showed up!

"What's all this noise, ron?!"

"Is that palpon flower...?!"

They both trembled, but don't worry! I showed no mercy! Bloooooosh!

"Rooooon!"

"Miiiii!"

Macaron-senpai didn't seem to like it, but I think Tiramii-senpai *really* liked it?! They both got super excited right away!

"I'm gonna dance too, ron!"

"Watch my moves, mii!"

We now had seven of AmaBri's top stars doing the mayim mayim just great! It was a total waste to do it backstage! So here's what I said: "Let's all go onstage!"

"I'm in, fumo!"

"I'm in, ron!"

"I'm in, mii!"

We all dashed down the corridor! On the way I sprayed everyone I met! Wrenchy-kun, Ironbeard-kun, Biino-chan, Shiina-chan!

Sprayface!! They all twisted and turned and they looked really happy!

"Let's goooo," I shouted out in joy!

"Yeeeah!" everyone else cheered.

We kept charging forward, dancing the Tokyo Ondo! But as we got to the stairs to the underground passage, our manager, Kanie-kun, stopped us!

"Hey, you guys! What's wrong with you?" he demanded suspiciously. "Have you been drinking?!"

"We haven't been drinking! We're just excited!" someone said.

"This is a serious problem! You can't go out in front of the guests!" he yelled. "Listen to me! Turn around right now and—" Blooooooosh! I sprayfaced Kanie-kun, too! I figured it had to be fun!

"Blugh! Ugh... ngh..." Kanie-kun staggered and pitched over.

"Ugh... uh... ngh..." Ah. Did he endure it somehow?!

Everyone gulped, not just me! If Kanie-kun said no, we knew that meant no, no matter how excited we were! Plus I didn't want him to be mad at me!

"Ngh..." he groaned.

"Kanie-kun?" I asked.

"Ugh... heh."

"You okay?"

"Please! You call that dancing?" he scoffed. "Let me show you how it's done! Poooow!" Kanie-kun started moonwalking! And he was really, really good at it! "Poooow! Poooow!" For some reason, he was mainly doing Michael Jackson dance moves, but it was amazing! "Poooow! Poooow!"

We all applauded! We did the Thriller dance together! We were so in sync! We were all zombies! Wow! We headed for onstage, walking like zombies, when we found Isuzu-san waiting at the top of the steps! She was standing right there with her musket pointed at us. It was so cool!

"You won't get by me," Isuzu-chan declared!

"Poooow!" Kanie-kun said.

"Poooow, fumo!" Moffle agreed.

“Seiya-kun... Lord Moffle... you’re in on this, too?” Isuzu-chan sighed. “How regrettable. Who’s responsible for this? Was it you, Sylphie?”

I raised my hand real fast! “Yep! Is it bad?”

“Yes, it is,” she said sternly. “You must disperse at once.”

“Grr... if it’s a fight you want, you got it!” I told her. As a reviewer, I had to see this through to the end! So I readied the Palpon NEXT Super Jet!

“I like your spirit,” she said admiringly. “Bring it on.”

“I’d love to!” I said happily. “Okay... let’s go!”





The battle began! Isuzu-chan was just amazing! So strong! She dodged my sprayface! And again! And again! So cool! The final boss is always the toughest! Isuzu-chan fired! Sylphie dodged! I tried really hard, but I lost! Isuzu-chan finally hit the Palpon NEXT Super Jet and destroyed it!

“Understand?” she said flatly. “I cannot permit you to go onstage. Now, disperse.”

“Fiiiiine...” I sulked. We all lost our excitement and dispersed! Defeat! It had been so fun, too. Too bad.

But I’m so glad I got to see Isuzu-chan lend Kanie-kun her shoulder as he stumbled away! It was so nice to see! They’re a great couple! Woo, woo!

And that’s the end of my review!



[Addendum]

Sorry! I need to report some side effects about the Palpon NEXT Super Jet I reviewed the other day! After you get excited, you get super depressed!

Apparently Kanie-kun spent the rest of the day staring at a tree outside his office going, “Ah, that tree has such nice branches...” Like he wanted to hang himself off one of them!

And apparently Isuzu-chan had to watch over him for the next few days or things would have gotten dangerous!

Sorry!

Moffle-senpai was really down for a while, and so were the Elementario folks. So were the rest of the cast. I’m really sorry! Sorry! I won’t use the Palpon NEXT Super Jet any more!

It’s weird though, huh?! It worked so well on everyone else, but it didn’t work on me! That’s the one thing I don’t understand!

# Afterword

Last issue was a pretty heavy story, so this one is about... the four girls who played a big part in the anime but haven't had much screentime in the books. Also, it was annoying me, so I changed their attraction from Aquario to Elementario! It's fine! This series flies by the seat of its pants! Now, some notes about each episode.

## **That Time the Spirit of Fire Got Back From Work and Found Her Apartment in Flames**

I'm sure you've all been a rubbernecker to a house burning down (maybe it was even your own house). I have, too.

One night in mid-winter, a residence in my neighborhood completely burned down. I just watched, feeling like, a writer has to see these things! (Apologies to the people who suffered damages, of course.) But while they fought the fire, a whole lot of water from the torrent got away from them and hit us rubberneckerers! Many of them tried to run, but I just stayed where I was, steeling myself for divine retribution.

I was soaked in an instant. The weight of that water... It was freezing. The scene of a fire is cold. It was very educational.

## **I'm Not All Rotten, Okay?**

This is all about how Kobory is an unsung hero.

I don't know if people really ever did lighting controls with the PC-98, but that's based on a story a car-loving friend of mine once told. He was a street racer type, and he loved tuning up his beloved old car. It was a model with a first-generation electrical system, and the factory settings included a limiter, so he had to change the programming in order to improve its specs. But you could only access the car's system with a machine that ran DOS/V, which is very rare nowadays, so there were probably only a few people left in Japan who could mess with the car's programming (as I write this, I still don't know if he ever actually changed it!).

I guess that as time passes, the number of people who can work with these old machines grow fewer and fewer. It almost seems to go without saying that hackers in fiction will be young gamer types, but I often think it would be great if one was a sixty year old man. Too bad

I don't have any chances to put one of those in my stories. Maybe someone else is doing it somewhere.

## **An Unusual Combination**

"The Passion of the Muse" is what this basically comes down to.

The people who control the purse strings at jobs are always respected by everyone. I've always been self-employed (like a green grocer), so it doesn't fully resonate with me, of course.

Speaking of finances, my supervisor Morii-kun often takes me out drinking to a place called "Ofuro" (it's your typical dining pub). Morii-kun always takes the check and hands it over to the accountant at his company. When he does, the finances person always says loud enough for everyone else to hear: "Morii-kun, did you go to Ofuro (the bathhouse) with Gatou-san again?! You sure like that, huh?!"

The people around me must get the wrong idea. It's embarrassing. And Fantasia Bunko doesn't cover expenses like those, just so you know. And I've never been to a bathhouse like that, though I go to saunas and communal baths a lot. I mean it.

## **Sylphie Channel! Exciting Reviews**

Erm. Yes. Sorry for the weirdly hyper story.

Sylphie is still a total mystery even to me, and I'm not sure I could write her sober, so I got falling-down drunk before I wrote that. She's probably the kind of person who has dancing sunflowers grooving in her head at all times. Such optimism! It's a mindset that a pessimistic old-timer like me can't even get into. We could all learn a little from her. Just a little.

I knew what to make it about immediately after watching a famous toy review program on a certain video site cover some bug spray that just happened to show up at their job. It was so ridiculous, but it was really funny, so maybe they'll keep doing reviews of weird items like that.

Next volume, I want to do a long-form story, but I don't know how it'll turn out! Anyway, thanks to everyone who was involved, and sorry for all the trouble!



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by Shouji Gatou

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